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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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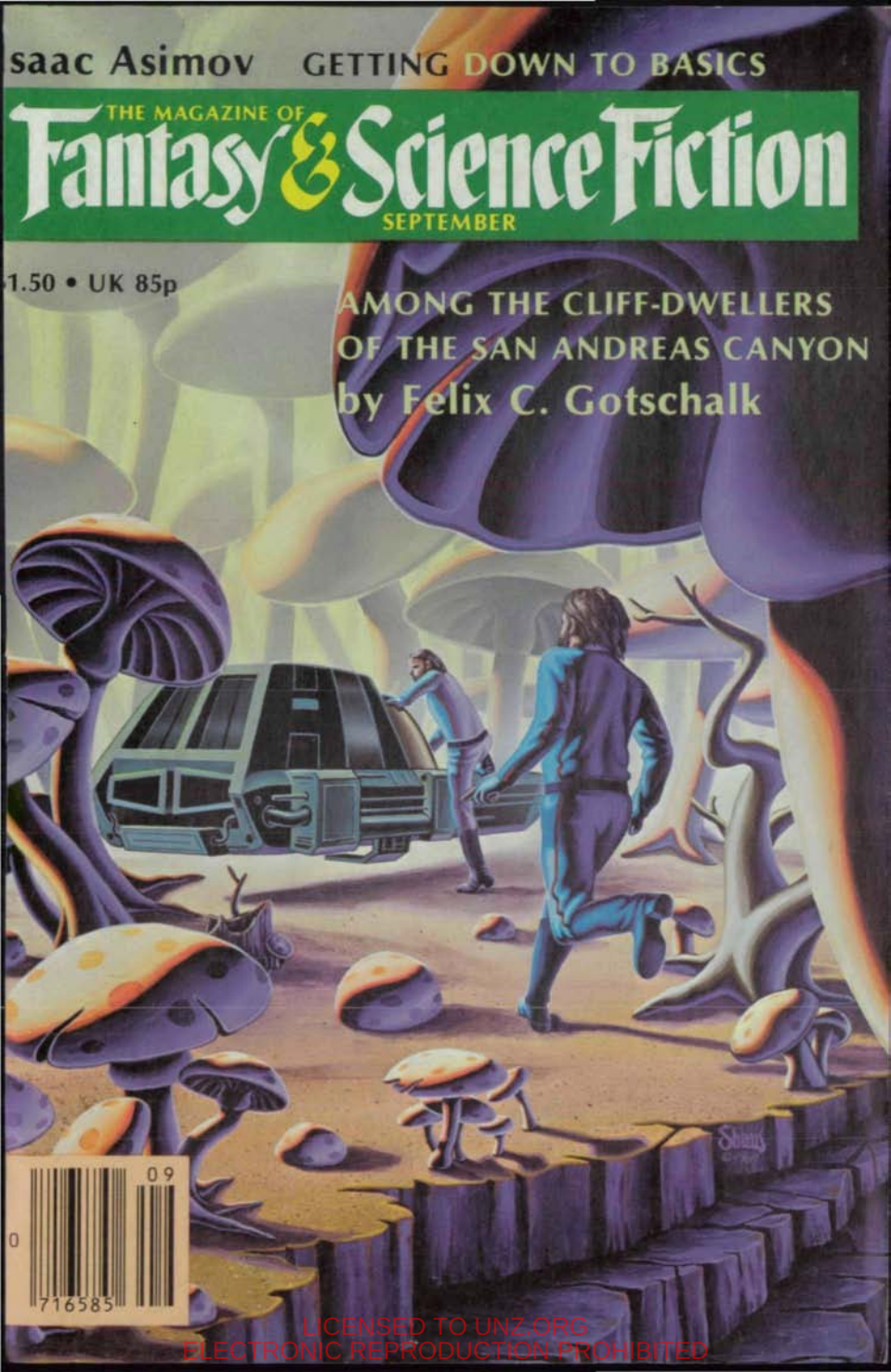
AMONG THE CLIFF-DWELLERS OF THE SAN ANDREAS CANYON
by Felix C. Gotschalk



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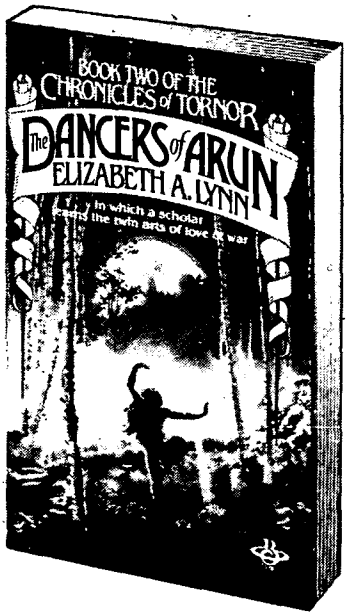

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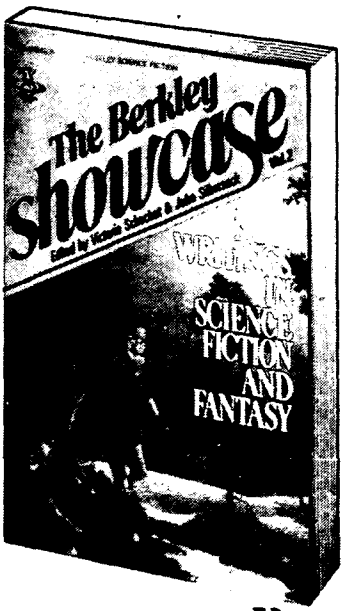

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This immensely colorful and entertaining tale about a post-holocaust society unlike anything else this field has imagined is from one of sf's most distinctive new writers. Dr. Gotschalk writes that he grew up in Virginia, was a teen-aged machine gunner in the Marines, and then spent seven years in college. "I taught psychology in Louisiana, and have been a psychologist in North Carolina for 20 years. My first writing sale was in 1970 and still hasn't appeared in print (Ellison's DV). I like feminine women, black cigars, cognac, Stilton cheese and arm wrestling. Writing is an egocentric exercise for me; I do it with pleasure and occasional gusto..." Which, we think, is exactly how you will respond to this new story.

Among the Cliff-of the San Andreas

BY

FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

It was in the cruel month of April, in the calendrical tier of 2072, that the San Andreas fault in California Territory split, forming a bottomless canyon about 100 miles long, but barely 100 feet across at any point. No great loss of life accompanied the event, since the area had been largely abandoned for years. The super-accurate Russian ICBM's had been dropped into San Francisco Bay in the demonstration war of 1990, their azimuths carefully programmed for logistically harmless visual displays; and twenty million Californians accepted conscription into the Russian Five-Year Plan, rather than face the undeniable consequences of the threatened invasion by land. Russian teleport-transporters whisked the conscriptees to Siberian labor camps a thousand at a time, and this brief and dramatic exodus was considered a ransom, a staggering tribute, to keep the peace. "Give us twenty million workers," Smierdakov had thundered, "and we will leave you in peace." And peace there was, a peace as silent as a tomb. The Russians then violated the peace by "icing over" the canyon area with virulent spore cultures, much in the manner of the "scorched earth" policy of earlier wars. The hardy few people who elected to stay were forced down into the canyon, there to laboriously chisel handholds and footholds and burrows and

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Dwellers Canyon

caverns. Later, large excavations were dug, tunnels and labyrinthine passages extended deeper into the settling earthen walls, and crude bridges, nets, and scaffolds connected the sides of the crevasse. The survival trick was to scavenge and forage on the contaminated surface, and retreat down into the relative safety of the canyon before the level of spore activity became dangerous.

In the gentle month of May, 2073, ninety-seven men, women, and children lived in a part of the canyon called Capistrano Manor. They feuded with the cliff dwellers in L.A. Heights, five miles south, and with the surfers and jocks in the cliffs of Malibu Walls, two miles north. Frustration and anger made for lack of group cohesion, there was a notable lack of esprit de corps anywhere, and the Capistrano people were making a valiant, futile, ritualistic effort to develop some compensatory-rigid societal structure. Early on one of the May evenings, a watermelon-sized boulder crashed down on Dora Wells' scaffold, damaging it, and killing her emaciated poodle. Dora's man, Hiram Carson, reported the incident to the judicial board, and a hearing took place the very next day. About sixty people crowded into the courtroom, an excavation some 40' by 40' by 10', and stood crowded against the maze of wood and steel supports shoring up the cavern. Judge Hank Merhige banged his impressive gravel (actually liberated from the California Supreme Court chambers) on the lectern and called the session to order. A corpulent bailiff approached Hiram.

"Raise your right hand," he intoned, "and put your left one on the book." Hiram did so. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as best you see it, so help you, in the name of whatever god you believe in?" Hiram cocked his grizzled face up at the bailiff and smiled. He snorted and sucked on a horehound drop.

"Why, hail yass, ah do, and thet's coverin' a lotta groun'."

"Come on, Hiram," Judge Merhige said, sounding testy and weary both, "just say yes or no."

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"Wail, hail," Hiram said, acting mock-puzzled, "thetsa long question to be givin' secha short answer to. Ah bet you'd give a speech effen you got assed thet. But, ah guess effen hit had to go either way, ah'd say yass."

"Go ahead, Glenn," the judge said, and Glenn John, the D.A., stepped up to face Hiram.

"State your name and address," Glenn intoned, casually dominant and authoritarian.

"Whut'd you say?" Hiram's tone was mockingly incredulous.

"State your name and address — for the record," Glenn gave some ground.

"Wail, shitfire, Glenn, awl yawl in thissear parta thuh canyon know me — ah'm firebran' Hiram Carson — the best, the meanest, the sure-footinest wall-climber in the whole world."

"The court is aware of your stature in the commune, Hiram. Tell us where you live," Glenn already sounded weary and tolerant, and some laughter rustled among the spectators.

"Why, ah live within rock-throwin' distance of you, Glenn, at, let's see — level four, hole number seventeen, 'bout halfway up to the surface."

"Now tell us," Glenn said, "in your own words —"

"Them's the onliest words ah know," Hiram interrupted, and there was more laughter.

"Tell us what happened last night."

"Wail, hit was coldern' uh well-digger's ass in Siberia, it wuz. Ah was out on the scaffold, tryin' to see if thuh nets wuz holdin' up good, so's ah could get over to the whorehouse. Last week, a whole damn car came afallin' down. It missed the nets on the top five layers, but clipped B-22, I think it was, then B-20 on level five, and then it fell on out of sight, quiet as a bird—"

"Tell us about the night in question, Hiram, last night."

"Ah'll tell you whut," Hiram said, his voice rising, "thet low-down Clem Simpson over there climbed out of his hole, by God, and he rolled a damn big rock smack down on Dora's scaffold!" Hiram pointed his heavy, grimy hand at a man in the room.

"Order! Order!" Hank shouted. "Hiram, you can't say that. This ain't no kangaroo court. Glenn, instruct the witness as to how he is to answer your questions."

"Wail, shit!" Hiram scoffed, "evabody knows he did it. Ah ain't nevah seed a more guilty-lookin' sonuvabitch in awl mah borned days—"

"Objection!" the voice of Harold Cox sang out. "The witness is indulging in the sheerest speculation. As Clem's counsel, I object."

"Sustained! Sustained!" Hank shouted again. "Hiram, your testimony is barely minutes old, and already it is chocked with assumptions and inferences and accusations that have no basis in fact. Now, I'm telling you to give us facts, and not what your addled brains tell you is the God's

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truth." Hiram shuffled and clicked the horehound lozenge against his teeth.

"Ah'm doin' the bestest ah kin, Hank. Truth is truth, thet's whut ah allus sed. Ah allus sed thet." Hank's thin dusty black robe undulated as he wiped his brow and scratched his bald head.

"A society has to have rules, Hiram. Brute strength may not triumph over group strength—"

"Amen!" a basso voice sounded from the rear of the room. Then, a huge shadow flapped along the canyon wall above, and the siren and splintered metal cry of a pterodactyl echoed in the canyon. The people paid little attention to it.

"Killin' a tiny ole dawg with a boulder is brutish enough," Hiram said. "I always took Clem Simpson to be a dirty, no-good—"

"Order!" Hank banged the gavel down. "Keep *silent*, and answer Glenn's questions carefully — no side remarks — understand? Or I'll confine you — Proceed, Glenn." Glenn wanted to pace the floor, he wanted to pretend that he was elegantly dressed, strutting, preening optimally, charismatically in front of an ornate jurors box. He wanted to savor some long dramatic pauses, to have a resonant courtroom to bounce echoes of his voice back to him, a press gallery, perhaps even television cameras. But he had none of these. His shoes were frayed Tretorns, his pantaloons a naggingly scratchy mohair-synthete, and his shirt a poignant-slapstick souvenir of a carnival, emblazoned with a faded print of The Amazing Spiderman. Still, he felt the ritual of the moment.

"Now then, Mr. Carson, tell us again, and carefully this time, if you don't greatly mind, exactly how you remember the incident in question. And choose your words carefully."

"Let's see, it's like I told you, I was checkin' the net to the whorehouse, an' ah jes' chanced to look up. As big as it was, thet rock made not a swish nor a swizzle. Ah didn't know whut it was, but ah knew ah'd better git outta the way."

"And did you take evasive action?"

"Twartn't no time. Ah'd barely had time to flinch a leetle bit afore it fell on Dora's scaffold — splintered it all to hell, it did."

"And did you continue to look upward?"

"Ah looked down — leastways, it was more like straight across, to see where it hit."

"And did the impact impede the descent of the missile?" Glenn seemed pleased at the sound of the question.

"Whut thuh hail you think you're talkin' 'bout?" Hiram teased. A shapely girl in the front of the crowd snickered and waved to Hiram. The bailiff started to move toward her, pointing his rider's crop at her (liberated from the L.A. Saddle Club), and the girl put up her arms in mock terror.

"Did the rock slow down when it hit?" Glenn again sounded weary.

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"Well, hail yass it did. Ah built thet scaffold outta heavy wood, sprayed it with creosote. For a second, I thought it would jam in the deck, but it didn't. It 'jes mashed the dawg and fell on through. It's probably still fallin'."

"And did you see Clem Simpson at all during that time?"

"You bet your strawberry ass, ah did—"

"Objection!" Harold Cox bellowed. 'The witness's crudity obfuscates the clarity of the evidence, *and he did not see Clem!*" The talk in the room burgeoned again, and Hank pounded the gavel on the lectern. The talk continued, dying away very slowly.

"How do you know who he saw, Harold?" A deep, gravelly voice came from the crowd, and a chorus of approbatory rumblings followed. In the distance above, a hand-cranked siren wailed into life, and several of the people left the room, noisily and rapidly.

"Adjourned, adjourned, goddamnit," Hank said, and the rest of the people began to leave. The siren was the daily signal that the virulence level of the ground spores was safe, and that meant the daily climb to the surface for what the cliff dwellers had come to call "search and seizure missions."

"Who's slated to go topside today?" Hank asked, taking off his judicial robes.

"Team number twelve, ah 'bleeve," Hiram grunted. "Ah hope they find some good roughage. Ah ain't had no good cereal in weeks." The small cluster of men left in the room spread apart, relishing the increased allocation of floorspace.

"Is Clem on the team today?" Hank asked.

"Shit if I know." Hiram said, "en ah doan' keer."

"Why you blamin' this on Clem, Hiram?" Hank asked. His tone was casual enough to be saying good morning or to ask the time of day.

"Cuz he's a no-good sonuvabitch, thet's why." Hiram sounded every bit as casual.

"You mean you really didn't see him?" Glenn asked, not quite as casual.

Hiram looked at Glenn as if surprised that the question came through with sincerity. He shuffled and snorted, projecting a mixture of derision and camaraderie. "Well now, what's more important, Glenn," the voice was almost taunting, "whether a man is guilty, or whether he's a no-good sonuvabitch?" Glenn sighed under his breath and looked away. Outside, the cheers of Team No. 12 sounded. It was incongruous, the ragtag group of people exhorting each other as they climbed up through the maze of bamboo splints, redwood framing, ropes, nets, chutes, girders, channels, decks, styrofoam cylinders, squirrel-cage ladders, in all, a humorous, crazy, jackleg, jerry-built edifice. The cheers were matched by those who would stay in their holes today, hoping that the team would bring back something extra

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good. Old Annie Brown croaked her request for more brandy to a man clambering up past her burrow, and the man knew she had at least half a case of brandy hoarded away in the dry, straw-lined recesses of her cubbyhole. Glenn continued to look at Hiram as the cheers faded away in the vertical distance. Glenn thought Hiram a hopeless case, and Hiram knew it.

"This ain't no air-conditioned federal court, you know," Hiram said. "What few rules we have here serve to keep us from killin' each other. And, in case it ain't glimmered in your mind, Glenn, the search and seizure missions are comin' up shorter and shorter. What's gonna happen when we get to starvin? We can't grow anything to eat down here. I see a time comin' when we'll start sizin' each other up in terms of how much meat is left on our bones, and whether we'll taste good or rancid to each other."

"Jesus Christ, cannibalism?" Harold Cox asked, quietly.

"Let's keep this strictly to ourselves," Hank said. "God knows we've got enough problems without adding one that scary. Despite the harshness of our lives here, I believe I sense a spirit of striving in the people, a life-energy, a force that is constructive—"

"Shit, thet's politician talk," Hiram scoffed. "Life is the onliest thing we have. It may be tough and coarse and mean, but I don't see no options. We're stuck with what we have." The men looked at the floor and at each other, dully, immobile, like prisoners accustomed to confinement.

"I don't know your gripe with Clem, Hiram," Hank said, seeming to want the other men to hear it all, to be witnesses, "but don't let it get in the way of things here. If you've got some bad blood with him, and he disappears one day, there's nothing to do about it. People have disappeared before. But we can't be infighting here; it's all we can do to fight off the L.A. and Malibu people, not to mention the very damn basic fact of simple staying alive from week to week." Hiram looked at the crude earthen floor and decided to hold his peace. Outside, topside, the shouts had died completely away. S & S Team No. 12 was on the surface.

Clem Simpson looked out at the clear shimmers on the horizon and held up his hand. The four other team members formed a straight line in front of him. In a sudden burst of fury, one of the men began slashing at a four-foot-high toadstool, the pithy white structure surprisingly resistant to the machete cuts.

"Don't waste your strength," Clem said to the man. "You know damn well how fast those things grow." The man ceased his attack. "Let's get crackin'," Clem said. "Sam and I will take the landspeeder to Diego and stock up on basics, dry foodstuffs, mostly. Manuel and Bob, take the flitter to La Jolla and try that burned-out mall for clothing

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—and don't dilly-dally, the way you did last time — you made it back last week by the barest skin of your adventurous asses. Eric, you take the teleporter and go for liquids — and not all scotch and tequila this time, okay? Remember we've got some milk and orange-juice types here, too." Clem kicked at the blanched earth, and powdery dust arose. The earth seemed irrevocably dead, inert, dry-musty, molecularly at rest. Then, not ten feet away, the gray-white surface bulged, cracked, and the phallic crown of a new toadstool appeared. There were times when the earth seemed to be striving, struggling for photosynthetic life, but the precious imaginary green remained masked by the whiteness of the spore cultures. Puffballs and ghostly white tumbleweeds lay on the plain, and the giant toadstools were everywhere. The dry devil-winds would sweep the area every few days, and then the rain would fall, a slow, filmy, sluggish wash of moisture that served to further bleach the porous white desert. There was chalky-white crust and mud the color of skim milk. Gray boulders lay on beige-colored shale, and there were sodden, fallen cacti, exfoliated trees, carcasses and skeletons. With the exodus to Russia, pure air had returned to California. The Chinook winds then shifted to the south, bringing humid and gentle climatic changes. And now the sun flared its cruel rays down on the ragtag group of men and on the miserable geologic crust and on the dark slash that was the San Andreas Canyon.

"Mount up," Clem said. "Everybody got it straight? Remember, no heroics, no romances, no dalliances. Provisions are falling, reserves are down, we've got to go with the basic hardtack stuff. Meat and potatoes, mother's milk, fig leaves to mask our nakedness—"

"Hey, the man's waxing poetic on us again," Sam teased. "Before we go, Clem, just what the hell is going wrong with Hiram? We know you didn't roll any rock down on Dora's scaffold."

"The old gila monster's been out in the sun too long," Clem said, "he's made too many long missions with the spore count running high. And I think he's worried about dying."

"Well, shit, so am I. This is my fifty-first mission."

"I stopped counting a while back, you should too — hey, we can talk later, let's get with it. We've got — synchronize your watches — four hours and twenty-two minutes. Ready? Good luck, good hunting." Eric backed into the elliptical bubble of the teleporter, adjusted the controls, waved, and the craft disappeared. Manuel and Bob climbed into the cockpits of the gosamer-winged flitter, activated the drive, and lifted away. Sam and Clem clambered in the landspeeder.

"Damn thing's getting pretty shopworn," Sam said. "We need to liberate another one. How's the fuel cell?" The

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men donned life-support helmets and plugged in. "Still reading well into the green," Clem said, scanning the spartan instrument cluster. "Ready?" "Ready." The antigrav turbine screamed its muted 90,000 rpm pitch, and the thrust phased to horizontal, as if a bevel-gear of pure energy was receiving force from a vertical plane and redirecting it to the curvature of the earth. The speeder blasted away, pluming a thick, white roostertail of bleached dust high in the air.

"Keep it on the well-worn track," Clem said over the intercom. "We'll raise less dust that way, keep a good low profile."

"Aye, aye, sir," Sam said, cheerily, "how about a ration of refrigerated air for a sweltering copilot?"

"Coming up," Clem flicked a toggle switch and felt the freon balm on his face, blowing cool through his beard. The speeder blasted down what the people had come to call the "cattleshoot" or the "rollercoaster," a corridor of sorts, about one hundred feet wide, and relatively clear of the detritus that otherwise cluttered the plain. The ancient naval base at Diego lay some miles to the west, and the cliff dwellers had been taking provisions from the huge underground commissaries there for years. The speeder whistled and sang its primal scream as it planed into a shallow-angle climb, leveling off at fifty feet altitude. The debris-strewn landscape swept by beneath: the thousands, the millions, the ugly billions of white mushrooms, the fungi cylinders, puffballs, cattle skeletons, gnarled white trees, epicenter cracks, long, wavering fissures, everything bleached white and beige and ivory. The sun rode high and bold and merciless in its downward flood of light and heat. If sunlight had, in past centuries, cast gentle and beneficent rays on man and beast alike and had at times ennobled them in their roles, so now that same sun illuminated the pitiable bleakness and colorlessness of the California desert. Darkness had come to be a true visual blessing for the people, the soft velvet purple of night giving some temporary respite from the faded white days. The landspeeder's antigrav system limited its cruising altitude to about fifty feet, and while there was a margin of error here, both Clem and Sam preferred the altitude because it combined features of both aerial and terrestrial flight. For example, it was great fun to ride a sled half an inch off the ground at 100 mph, but no great kick to be jetting along at 2000 mph at 30,000 feet. It was perceptual fun, as well as effective reconnoitering, to cruise at fifty feet and 100 mph. Far in the west, out over the ocean, Clem saw a thunderhead begin to build.

"Thank God for a cloud," he said. "Look there, Sam, first good cloud I've seen lately."

"Yeah, it is a good thick fat one, makes me want to jet right smack into it."

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"Yeah—hey! Looks like an L.A. bandit at three o'clock high." Clem flicked a telecom switch. "Hey, L.A. bandit, this is Capistrano shotgun. Yeah, I can see your bright orange ass clear as day. Where you headed? We don't feel like any dogfights today." Sam couldn't help but wince just slightly at Clem's deference.

"No need, buckshot-seed," an hallucinogenic voice sang, "our S & S today is strictly peace — like, we wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Where you headed?" Clem repeated.

"L.A. Flats, what's it to you, I don't give a shit where you're going." Then the same voice turned friendly, passive, spacey, detached. "You got anything good at Capistrano? Anything we can use, or steal?"

"Got enough brandy to souse a regiment, but not enough meat and potatoes. You got anything to swap?"

"Got enough pot to stone three regiments easy. Need some new threads, man, we've got cats making it in loincloths, and chicks in sackcloth. Clothes make the man, man, like point me to a haberdashery mall."

"Move to Idaho Flats, bandit. It's one big fat rich commune."

"Rather stay here with a broken leg than cop in with those fat farmers — hey, don't try any rapport-shit with me, we're enemies, remember? You Capistrano Cats are Squaresville to the cubed root. We may raid your shantytown lash-up any night, man, look out for us—" the telecom broke off at the bandit end.

"L.A. freaks are always high on something, always pumped full of psychomimetics," Clem said, "and it makes for a very stable economy there."

"Getting stoned may be a fair substitute for not having any clothing, but it can't last," Sam said. "Yeah, what is so eminently barterable as a potent joint, a mood change in the stick, a gut-level persona change for a few hours?"

Minutes later, the speeder was whistling over the sparsely populated fringes of the city of Diego. Huge mudslides filled the canyon-streets, the setting so dear to Southern Californians of the past. To live in, on, or above your own small, private canyon was a housing option available only to such people. The obvious dangers (fire, flood, wind, entrapment) bothered them not the least. After all, the earth was the most solid thing man could stand on, indeed, the only thing. Californians came to trust their fragile geologic piecrust completely. To do otherwise would be meaningless, since one could not spend the days and weeks worrying about the actuaries of earth tremors. A person could devote a lifetime worrying about when the great quake would occur, and another could blandly divert zero worry to the subject and be plunged into an epicentric fissure on any given day. Clem eased the speeder down low over a freeway

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leading to the naval base. Thousands of vehicles still choked the lanes, but central lane had been cleared many years ago, so that now a brave nomadic cyclist or motorist could sweep grandly past the jumbled array of antique internal combusters, steamsleds, turbobikes, vans, speeders, and flitters. Clem paid little attention to a quarter-million-dollar Faisal-Opec limousine beneath a cluster of pediatric skate-sleds and humming-bird commuter flitters. The detritus of the city was of a different sort, and it was this vast megalopic trash pile that kept the cliff dwellers alive for the time being.

"Commissary, dead ahead," Clem said. The electric fence around the base had been rammed and downed and cut in hundreds of places, and the guard station lay smashed and covered with grafitti statements: NEXT STOP, MOSCOW. VLADIVOSTOK SUCKS. CALIFORNIA YAY, SIBERIA NAY. PROSTATE KICKERS ARE FREE. THE U.S. NAVY COULDN'T WIN A WAR IN A BATHTUB. The speeder slowed to a crawl, and Clem and Sam drew their phasers. There were other scavengers about and it was simpler to ambush than to forage, depending on who it was you purported to ambush. A group of pediatric lepers turned to stare at the speeder from a catwalk above a fabrication pit. The children looked plump and healthy, but their faces were like swollen chondric masks of ant-lions, centaurs, and griffins. One bellowed a strange laryngeal croak and Sam waved. He wanted to salute the group in some neutral, appropriate way but could not escape the feeling of being in a parade and waving, commercially, woodenly, at the spectators lining the route.

"Those kids have it better than we do," Sam said, "plenty to eat, privacy, fun places to explore—"

"And their faces are filled with velvety nodules," Clem said. "They live with virulent bacilli, fierce, beaded chains of microbes are roping their guts together."

"Yet, in some ways, they are freer than we are. The earth here is not rotten with mushrooms, and at least you can sleep topside. You don't have to slink down in some hole at night." The speeder crept past the ruins of barracks where, in the dim past, 120 men slept in one huge room, "sleeping sixty-nine" in double-decker metal-frame bunks, each man's possessions locked in a wooden box half the size of a vintage steamer trunk. Where, each morning, a bugler sounded his brassy reveille at six, and the men leaped and slunk from their beds to shave with foamy white cream and double-edged razors, standing side by side over twenty adjacent washbowls and mirrors. There where ten urinals and ten toilet bowls, and a young military man could masturbate easily in an orthodox defecatory posture while reading a newspaper spread sufficiently to mask his movements. The rows and ranks of buildings were dreary and warehouse-

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like, buildings that spoke of noncommissioned officers, of men of low socio-economic standing, of men who wielded brooms and wet mops, who polished the chrome fixtures on the washbowls, whose military function was so utterly meaningless that their days were spent in perpetual housecleaning. Of course, in wartime, in combat, an otherwise nondescript man might fire a machine gun from the year 1918, or affix a bayonet from antiquity, or boldly draw a .45-caliber pistol from a leather holster, a weapon accurate up to about forty feet, and given to a two-foot vertical buck when fired.

A chattering band of nut-brown Chicanos blocked the entrance to the commissary, but they recognized phasers as a kind of ultimate weapon and made ample room for Clem and Sam to enter.

"We got plenny girls," one said, "you want fuckee fuckee? You want good Mexicali Rose pussy?"

"No, thanks, Pancho," Clem said, "pussy is good, but food is vital — stand clear now — we don't want any trouble." But one of the small men darted immediately at Sam, scrambling for the phaser, eyes riveted to the tiny weapon. It was a clumsy, desperation lunge. Sam was readier than he needed to be, dropping into a shallow gunfighter stance and firing the stun-notched phaser. The Chicano's black hair stood on end in a temporary Afro Fan as the stunfield electrified his body.

"Everybody back!" Clem roared, covering the group with his phaser. "Get over there, close together, all in a bunch — yeah, that's it." The group shuttled together, shoving and bumping each other. "Now, one of you come, take your friend with you." Clem motioned to the man on the ground. "Take him, and split fast or we'll throw a stunfield on all of you. Which way you want it, wetbacks? Now sprint! Haul ass!" Some of the group broke and ran. Two men picked up the phasered man and carried him away. "Stay clear of us!" Clem shouted as the group dispersed. He set up a forcefield around the landspeeder. "You hit for the first freeze-dried food locker you can find," he told Sam. "You know where it is. Use a sack, and fill it with true basics, true hardtack essentials. Fill it so you have to drag it. I'll stay guard a few minutes." Sam ducked in the entrance and sprinted down an extraordinarily long corridor. The sense of visual perspective and the pressure of time excited him, and he felt self-propelled and tireless, fleet, fluidly muscular, fast as a cheetah. The grimy windows flashed by him at great speed; he covered ground as if he were a vehicle, and it was only when he was in the food locker that he discovered how winded and heart-pumping excited he truly was. He now felt tremendously rushed, as in a feverish dream, and he began to fill the plastic bag with the small food cubes, much like stuffing money in a sack. The shelves were

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still well-stocked, the cubes the size of cigarette packs, for some forgotten, reverse-logistical-commissarial reason, never boxed into anything larger. Sam dominoed long ranks of the rations into the bag: compressed beans, cabbage, corn, hominy, lentils, onions, peas, and soya soya soya — God, Sam thought, soya is as basic as *DNA* — every goddamn thing is made of soy beans. He swept in a sample of spinach cubes and potatoes. Skipping the fruit cube section, he moved on to the meats, dragging the sack on the floor, and feeling pressed for time, even trapped. He was alone-alone-alone, a desperate scavenger in a place of eerie silence, a place full of enemies. He tried to whistle, but could only blow a soundless little huff, like a little boy's nervous whistle late at night, walking home on a dark, tree-shrouded street, a true whistling-in-the-dark response.

"Shake a leg," Clem's voice came through the audios, startling Sam. "Big roverpak coming up the quay. I've got 'em in the scope at twenty power. Keep cool, there's plenty of time, maybe two full minutes." Christ, Sam thought, panic building behind him like a roistering crowd, that's all I need. Roverpaks had been common in the area for many years, just as packs of wolves and hyenas and dogs had always been common in nature. They were simply groups of people banded together for safety, for cohesiveness, for identification, for survival, for instinctive societal bonds. They had been called street gangs, guerrilla bands, terrorist hordes, marauders, raiders, scavengers, and other names. It was a simple matter of strength through grouping, of unit solidarity, and identification with a power source. The roverpaks of the Diego area were rather like plundering soldiers, though there were few fat caches of anything good left to plunder; so, like the Capistrano people, it was a basic matter of what to do to stay alive: of eating and sleeping and fighting and screwing. Sam clattered a shelf-load of protein and bouillon packs down into the bag and turned to leave.

"Shake it!" Clem's voice came through. "They're setting up a mortar. They see the speeder — shit, there goes a round —" Sam began to drag the bulky sack over the floor. It grated gently on the gritty concrete and made a sandpaper sound. Sam moved out into the endless corridor and felt an acrid mixture of panic and helplessness as he saw the open door to the outside so very far away, so very many grimy, gritty, dusty yards off. He tried sprinting, but the sack got in his way. He tried running beside the sack, and that was a little better, but still maddeningly slow. He tried lifting it, and, while it was not heavy, it was just too big and bulky. For an instant, he wondered if he should abandon it and run, but his desperation was focused on the sack, and he came to see the sharply bulging, silly-green, lumpy plastic bag as integral in his escape. He lashed the end

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of the bag around his wrist and heard the dull thud of a mortar shell.

"Too close." Clem came through again. "I'm gonna fake a take-off, Sam. Stand in the door, I'll pick you up in a sec." No, man, don't split, Sam cursed silently, and he began to drag the bag backwards, skittering along in a frantic reverse skidding walk. His feet made a chugging, churning sound, like an ancient steam locomotive with sand on the tracks. The gritty friction-song of the loaded sack wavered in synch with the loud soft-shoe sound of his walk. He sucked air, ferociously, like a weightlifter psyching up for a press. He puffed and blew and screamed inside for deliverance, for a conveyor belt, for a smooth catapault, for a teleport pop, for a steamsled, for a saving sweep of motive power, but none came.

"Lifting away," Clem said, "be ready." The second mortar shell hit the concrete outside close to where the speeder had been, and a bit of shrapnel sang past Sam's ear. He cringed, reflexively, and continued his crazy, funny, unheroic-looking backwards friction-walk. Now the door was about 200 feet away, but seemed 2000.

"Wait for the third mortar round," Clem said, "Get behind something, then cut for the outside."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Sam huffed. He made it to the door and stood there, his breath blowing like a row of pop-off valves. In the distance, he could see the roverpak people, perhaps fifty of them. They appeared to be walking, not charging, and they were silent.

"Another mortar round," Clem shouted from wherever he was, "take cover!" Sam pressed his body into the space beside the door and prayed for a poor shot. He heard the descending whistle of the ancient shell and decided to scream to minimize the concussion. It was an easy, loud, natural scream that he made, and the blast came, filling the corridor with whining shrapnel, concrete bits, and dirt. Shrapnel pierced the foodbag in places, but the punctures were small.

"All right, move it!" Clem sang out from the approaching speeder. "I'm zapping in on the door — you okay?"

"Yeah," Sam said, and dragged the bag out into the open. He almost fell in the small crater the third shot had made. He could hear the shouts of the roverpak as the speeder appeared, whistling, barely a foot off the concrete surface. Sam hefted the foodbag up and Clem pulled it into the rear cockpit. "Straddle it, and hang on," he shouted, and the speeder began to move. Sam reached for the handrungs, straddled the big sack, and fell forward, feeling like a man riding a barrel. He lowered his head down onto the padded cowl. He felt that his elevated ass was an easy target. The speeder scuttled around a corner of the commissary and shot down a long damp alleyway. Then, Clem stopped the vehicle, spun it entirely around, and blasted back toward the roverpak.

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"Hey, what the hell!" Sam said.

"Trust me," Clem said, quickly. "We'll be out of this in a few seconds. Grab a tight hold." The speeder surged ahead, just off the ground, cut the corner short at the door where the mortar rounds had fallen, and accelerated directly at the roverpak, now barely fifty yards off. The fourth mortar round hit far back in the alleyway near the place where Clem had done his turnaround, and now he slotted in full power, and the speeder charged the roverpak. The people shouted and scattered in the face of the unexpected charge. The mortar crew abandoned its cumbersome, stovepipe-looking weapon and ran. A few diehards dropped, sitting and prone, and got off some peppery rounds of small arms fire, but it was wild shooting. Clem half cheered and half jeered as the speeder shot up over the heads of the people at 100 mph and whistled away over the sprawling junkyard scene. Slowing to hover over a weed-studded golf course, Clem helped Sam distribute the food cubes in the cockpit recesses so that Sam could sit down. Clem checked his watch and knew that there was no time to waste. The rhythms of the spore plants were regular as clockwork, and the air back at the Capistrano site would be choked with softly exploding clouds of pithy white pollen clusters. It was ugly to watch: the expulsion of the ova from the crown of the glans, a soggy white egg erupting from a soggy white corpus luteum. It was like a dead fireworks display in slow motion, the firings and the detonating all turgid, morbid, fleshy, obscene. And yet, it was a life process, a stubborn, tough, malleable, adaptable life process that seemed to have no justification beyond itself. There was growth and differentiation and reproduction. There was the arid desert blooming with fleshy stalks and thickly ribbed pileal umbrellas slotted with spore openings. There were showers of spores dropping from the gills of the pileus, and there was the impudent expectoration of spores from the phallus itself, a wholly mutant process that continued to offend even hardened men like Clem and Sam. The cliff dwellers felt that they were at least partially accursed, that the act of seeding their area with cruel toadstools was barbarous. Yet, deep in his mind, Clem had been trying to discover something of economic value in the ugly white fungi forest. The trip back to Capistrano was dull, Sam even napped, and the teleporter and flitter were already berthed when Clem eased the speeder up to the parking area beside the canyon. Minutes later, the first toadstool quivered, the mycelium beneath wrenched its syngamous tendrils, and the life action started. The ground-level air in the area would now be poisonous for several hours. Still half a mile off, Hiram and Dora were filling a plastic bag with special fungi. Both heard the siren sound and immediately began to jog toward home.

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"Everybody back okay?" Clem asked Hank, as they sat with a group in Annie Brown's burrow, drinking twenty-dollar-a-quart brandy. Annie watched the bottle like a hawk as it was passed around.

"Far as I know," Hank grunted softly, swirling his brandy slowly in a large snifter. "Annie, did Hiram and Dora get back?"

"They were topside today?" Clem sounded concerned.

"Can't keep that crazy pair down," Annie cackled. "They went up right after you-all left, and digging tools with them."

"Digging tools?" Clem's voice was suspicious.

"Yeah," Annie said, and her voice seemed to reinforce the suspicion, as if she wanted Clem to uncover whatever it was that Hiram and Dora were up to. "That pair are up to something. Two old fools like that got no business topside." Clem took a long drink of the brandy. It warmed him from the mouth to the bowels. He felt like his entire peritoneal layer was glowing. Annie looked eternally rosy from drinking the concentrated wine. Her bulbous nose was dark red, filigreed with blue and purple blood vessels, like the light-bulb noses of ancient circus clowns.

"Did you bring me anything good?" Annie croaked at the circle of men, looking from face to face. "Which one of you brave foragers was supposed to bring old Annie some more brandy? I'm running low, you know." Manuel, Bob, and Eric smiled at the old woman, and she caught their expressions for what they were: asymmetric leers of total knowingness. She felt a little flare of anger, but then began to mentally count the bottles left in the case stashed under the straw in the corner. Brandy was better than anything to her, better than food or clothing or jewelry or warmth or health, and now she felt increasingly possessive about the last ten—no, it was eleven—quarts left.

"Maybe tomorrow," Hank said to Annie, "we're low on some basics, got to stock up on things that will keep us alive and kicking." Laughter and scattered shouts sounded from outside, and a man called out Hiram's name. Hank stepped out onto the pier-like structure that linked Annie's burrow to a central swinging bridge and saw Hiram and Dora descending the huge cargo net liberated from the marine base at Camp Pendleton. They moved with agility and confidence, their faded green safari suits dark with sweat, their heavy belts hung with small tools. Hiram wore a backpack filled with something. They stepped down onto the Eastern Promenade, as the communal scaffold was called, and headed for their burrows, paying little attention to anybody.

"Got any spores on you?" Hank called out to them. "Dammit all, you're going to get killed, and us in the process."

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"We're clean as babies, Hank-boy," Hiram called back. "You want to smail mah armpits?"

"You're in past curfew, man. You want to die quick? You know better."

"Got any brandy left? We got something to tell." Hiram ducked into his hole, shucked off his pack and belt, and was outside again right away. Dora did the same. They threaded their way through a complex bamboo-splint passageway and walked casually into Annie's burrow. Twenty or so people came out of their holes to watch and listen, and the word was passed up and down that something big was about to happen. It might be something unimportant or something vital, no matter, everything was important to the burrow-dwelling citizens of Capistrano.

"Hard-headedness is your dominant trait, Hiram," Hank said, as he passed the brandy to Dora. Annie continued to watch the bottle carefully, but then she gave up and went to get another. "How'd you and Dora make it back clean? You were ten, fifteen minutes late." Hiram took the beautiful foil-topped bottle from Dora and drank a killing quaff of the twenty-dollar brandy. He swizzled and sloshed the fluid in his mouth and finally swallowed it.

"God, that's good," he said, "thet thar is mother's milk, sure as hail."

"And you never got weaned either, did you," Dora teased, jabbing him lightly in the stomach.

"What is it you have to tell us?" Clem asked, and the group tensed at his casual readiness to question Hiram. Hiram was not in the least ruffled; in fact, he seemed oblivious of Clem's presence. He rubbed his belly, contentedly, and thought to scratch his genitals.

"There's a few low-lifed cliff-dwellers in here that I don't want to be around," he began.

"You talk like a crazy man," Harold Cox said. "Clem here is good as any of us. You got no call to be puttin' him down."

"I do believe you been out in the sun too long, Hiram," Clem said. "We used to be friends, what's wrong? You got something sized up wrong. You're good, no doubt about that, but you been pushing yourself or something. Maybe Dr. McCoy ought to check you out again."

"Ah doan need no quack sawbones to tell me ah'm awlrot," Hiram half snarled, "en anybody whutud roll a rock down ona dawg ain' fit to—"

"Damnit, you blind old goat!" Clem shouted. "For the last time, I didn't throw any rock. I was blind drunk at the time. Passed out, I was, with Harold here—"

"Effen he's your alibi, you ain' got much."

"Hush your squabbles," Dora put in, "what's done is done. Besides, I got my own ideas about who cut loose the boulder.

"Yeah? Who? Who who who?"

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Hiram seemed to be getting drunk on the one long drink.

"Never you mind, all in good time, all in good time. You don't know what's really going on."

"Hey, whose side you on? Ain't ah youah big daddy? You 'posed to be on mah side?" Dora moved to embrace Hiram, and the way she held him left little doubt that she considered him dear to her. There were murmurs of approval in the group. "Now tell everybody what we found today." The group leaned in, expectant.

"Truffles," Hiram said, softly. The group was notably silent in response to the one-word revelation. Outside, the cry of the ptrerodactyl sounded again as if to mock Hiram. The word had a harmless, playful sound to it, the word lacked phonic credibility, it had the ring of a nonsense syllable.

"Pardon me, I don't believe I heard you," said Sylvester in his best affectedly British accent.

"I heard him good," Hank said, "he said truffles. Truffles. Truffles."

"What the hell are truffles?" Eric asked. Hiram rubbed his hands together briskly. He looked at them, and Dora thought he was going to spit on them in preparation for some task like woodchopping or stump-pulling. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and then he began to look smug, cheshirish, the holder of a great secret. Clem knew what truffles were, but he did not say anything.

"Truffles is our ticket outta here, for those who want to go," Hiram said.

"Ain't nowhere I want to go anyway," Manuel said right away, "we'd all get drafted into the labor force if we left here. We'd get pulled, in no matter where we went. Why do you think I ran away from Albuquerque?"

"Well, then," Hiram took a slightly different tack. "truffles is gonna be the bestest barter unit since the World War Two U.S. dollar."

"What the hell are they anyway?" Eric asked again.

"They're purple-colored puffballs so good to eat, people'l pay big trades for 'em. I got me a sack of 'em over to the cave. Me and Dora found 'em, and there's plenny more." Immediately, Annie began to think in terms of exchange rates: how many truffles would it take to buy a case of brandy? Hank set to thinking what kind of deal the Malibu and L.A. people might make, and then he thought about the gourmet colony at Scottsdale, Arizona. Surely those pampered idle rich bastards would want truffles.

"Puff-balls!" Eric snorted, "God, we're eyeball deep in puffballs now. What do we need with more?"

"Cawz these are fitten to eat, lak ah toal you. You doan lissen good. Ah looked 'em up in a book. They're, whatchacallit, a *delicacy*, they worth plenny."

"Yeah? How much they worth?" Annie asked, her ideation flaring with flacons of liquor in heavy crates bedded full with excelsior.

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"Ain' no secret," Hiram said, "but we may git to fightin' about it."

"That's no problem," Hank said. "We'll have a council meeting on it. The truffles will be commune property, just like everything else."

"They worth twenny old U.S. bucks any day in the week," Hiram said.

"You mean *apiece?*" Eric asked.

"Damn right, apiece," Hiram said.

"Anybody else know about them?" Clem put in. "Is it a secret cache?" Dora looked at Clem, and there was a flash of shared knowledge in the exchange.

"One of the Malibu jocks spotted us one day," Dora answered, "buzzed us in his aircar. The site is barely a mile off, and he must have wondered what we were doing so close to the canyon. I think it was a Malibu that tried to do me in with the big rock." There were mumblings and murmurs in the group.

"I've suspected the presence of truffles around here," Clem said, "but I never thought of them as a potential barter unit." Hiram looked at Clem as if to say stay out of this, this is my game.

"What I say is who the hell wants 'em?" Manuel put in. "What good are they? Where's the market around here for purple puffballs?"

"And if they're so all-fired good, why don't we just eat them ourselves?" Annie asked. Hiram stretched out his arm and somebody handed him the bottle.

"The fat gourmets over at Scottsdale'll take 'em, sure as hail," Hiram said, "and, as far as us eatin' 'em, ah doan know. They ain't hardtack, and what we need is hardtack." He took a short pull at the bottle. "What ah need is roughage — hey, Sam, over there — yeah, wake up! You bring back any good cereal today? Ah may need to stick a hand grenade up my ass any day now." Sylvester winced at Hiram's casual remark. Dora eased the bottle from Hiram's lap, as if separating some huge penile appendage from between his legs.

"What you need is some anti-crudity pills," she said to him.

"Yeah, we got cereal," Sam said, "good old Kellogg's bran cubes, hundred percent roughage. I almost got killed getting it, too, so be appreciative." Hiram gave Sam a slow salute. Nobody seemed overly excited over the discovery of the truffles. The room began to darken with the approaching evening, and a wind began to sing through the maze of decks and struts and scaffolds and riggings. Clem and Hiram found themselves looking at each other, and the eye-contact evolved into a question of who was going to stare the other down. Dora picked up on this quickly and moved to head off any trouble. "When did you find out about the truffles, Clem?" she asked, and the tone of the question seemed to denote her basic alliance with Hiram; and yet there was a glimmer of something else there, too, some-

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thing secret, something that suggested an even deeper alliance with Clem. Clem felt that he should humor Hiram, or at least make some sociometric allowances for his cantankerousness.

"I didn't actually see one until a few weeks ago, and I didn't pay it much mind. But, just like Hiram, I read up on them, and then I knew that there must be a lot of them around the old forest area."

"You knew about the oak forest, then — the one that the Russkies defoliated?"

"Shit, we all knew 'bout thet," Hiram said, clearly annoyed at Dora sounding gracious to Clem.

"But, what you have to know," Clem began, feeling that he could put Hiram down and straight at the same time, "is that the conditions for a fungi culture, for a truffle harvest there, in all those oaken roots, are absolutely perfect."

"All we need now is *pigs*," Hank quipped. There was a long silence. Hiram broke it by clearing his throat, loudly, and spitting on the floor. He looked up to see Dora's disapproving wince and covered the spittle with loose dirt. His hand movements were like those of a cat drawing sand over excreta.

"Okay," Eric sighed, "I give up. Why do we need pigs? As if there was a chance of us getting any anyway."

"Because pigs sniff out truffles," Hank said. "That's the way they're found."

Hiram guffawed, loudly. "Wail, me en Dora are better'n airy shoat en sow you ever saw then! We done sniffed out a mess ovum." The entire group laughed and the level of tension eased again.

"What are you waiting for?" Eric asked. "Show us the little devils. Show us these here purple puffballs, these super barter-goodies, they sound too good to be true."

"Yeah, trundle 'em on out!" Manuel said.

"I got 'em over to mah burrow," Hiram said. "They ain't much to look at. Ah'da never taken 'em to be worth much by their looks." He got to his feet, slowly, creakingly, feigning a stiffness that was at least partially real, and went over to the cave opening. "Hey there, Neil!" he hollered at a small boy, "pop in my cave there and fetch the sack on the flooor." The boy darted into Hiram's burrow and emerged carrying a gray plastic sack.

"Give the lad a drink," Hiram laughed, as the boy proudly put the sack down on the floor in front of Hiram.

"I don't mind," the boy said, and he quickly downed a shot of the brandy. Annie glowered at him and he scuttled away.

"Ascomycetes," Hiram said, emptying the sack on the floor, "ass-*commy*-seats. Didn't think I knew the rott word, did ye, Clem?"

Clem bent quickly to examine the truffles. "Yeah," he said, "they look

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good, all right. I don't care what you call them, they look good. God, here's a nice black one, might have won a prize."

"There's some small as acorns, and some big as taters," Hiram said.

"You say they taste right good?" old Annie asked, leaning in close and picking up a walnut-sized truffle. She began to sniff at it, cautiously.

"They 'posed to be plum delishuss," Hiram said, "but they for gore-mays, not for rumheads lak you. Gimme thet back." Annie spun away from Hiram.

"Tain't yourn to keep," she snapped at him. "I ain't gonna eat it. It ain't got no smell at all."

"A pig can sniff one out from a distance of twenty feet," Hank put in. "That's why I said all we need now is pigs." The small group of people crowded around to see the black and purple fungi-trophies. There were a dozen or so truffles there in all, and they surely looked unimpressive, unprepossessing, there on the earthen floor of the cave, surrounded by people in equally unprepossessing garb.

"Hey, you suppose the Scottsdale people got pigs?" someone asked. "We could swap the truffles for the pigs."

"No, you don't see it right," Hank said, impatiently. "We don't need pigs, what we need is *clothing*. We'd try to swap truffles for clothes, not for pigs." The man who asked the question looked down at his worn shoes, the sides cut out because of bunions. "Anybody bring back any shoes today?" he asked, and there was no answer.

"We'll have a council meeting on this tomorrow," Hank said, "and someone'l have to go to Scottsdale."

"Better check out the oak forest area first," Clem said, "make sure there' plenty more where these came from."

"There's plenny, doan you worry none," Hiram retorted. "The way ah see it is lak this: we are plum sittin' pretty. Lak them Ay-rabbs from a hunnert years ago, them Ay-rabbs what had all the oil on the whole globe. They got so rich they didn't have no idea what to do with their money. Ah say we gonna be thet way, soon as these little gore-may puffballs git to goin'."

"So what did the Arabs end up doing with all that extra money?" Eric asked, and his tone suggested his foreknowledge of the answer. Hiram scratched his chin.

"Why, they bought most of London, ah 'member thet. Yeah, hail, ah remember, they bought most of Beverly Hills, too."

"What they bought most was armaments," Hank said. "They bought jet plants and nuclear bombs and armored vehicles and turbopistols. They got so rich the only thing they had left to do was start wars."

"Ah 'members the demonstration war clear asa bail," Hiram grunted. "Ah set rot thar in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge and watched the ICBM's fall, real slow-like, into the

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water, 'bout ten miles out. Then they set them off, and you never saw secha mushroom cloud—hey, you think we got mushrooms—ah seed one halfa mile high, a water-plume stalk on it so big it made my eyeballs swim. Hey, what the hail, let's have another drink, ah got to go to bed, ah'm wore out.' He fairly snatched the bottle from Annie and killed off the last few swallows.

"You owe me about seven quarts now," Annie said, squeezing a hurt, sorrowful tone into her voice. Hiram laughed. "You jes' 'member who it is risks their asses to go get thet stuff for you, who it is that delivers the goods. You and me is at least even, at least even."

Outside, the wind sang some groaning 40 mph gusts, and the Capistrano edifice creaked like an ancient sailing ship in a storm. Darkness came quickly as the people returned to their caves. The truffle-filled sack over his shoulder, Hiram walked none too steadily through the bamboo-splint shoot across to his cave. He put the truffles in a wall-safe niche, his cadmium headlamp shining bright in the darkness. Dora had said that she wanted to be alone tonight, and Hiram had only grunted as she kissed his grizzled cheek and said good night. People cut on their tv's and tape-cubes and trivid podiums to watch the shows. The air was crowded with orbiting satellites, some as low as 50,000 feet, speeding along on solar-drive turbines, and the one hundred regular video channels were packed with an endless variety of information and entertainment. Hiram lay on a huge pile of rugs, pneumoplast pallets, and pillows. He dialed the Scottsdale channel to get a weather check. He fell asleep, convinced that he would have to go to Scottsdale. Hank's cave was like a museum, filled with priceless furniture and statues from St. Simeon, chattels that now had no particular value. In one drawer of an ornate chest, $80,000 in old U.S. paper money lay, unwrapped, unprotected, and nonbarterable. Hank fitted a refrigerated sleep-mask over his face and fell asleep at once. In the whorehouse, Manuel pumped away, astride a bionic copulatress, whose barter-fee was a ration of pelvic-implant transistors. Annie opened another bottle of brandy and dialed the incest soap-opera channel. Another day at Capistrano Manor was ending. And, in Dora's tapestry-hung burrow, she and Clem lay together, sexually fused and welded, nibbling love-talk into each other's mouths.

The shadow of the sun still spread westward across the changed and changing face of the United States, flowing along at its cosmic constant of 500 mph. It had done so for billions of years, while the earth boiled in lava, choked in vegetation, drowned in water, dried, baked, split, froze, leavened, wrenched, quivered, and gave life to squid and crickets and

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sloths and men. The sun had been daily witness to solitary fires, village trails, hunting bands, vast animal herds, thunder and lightning, tribal battles, the clearing of land, and the building of monuments. It was only during the past 150 years or so (the briefest eyeblink on the face of time) that the face of the country had changed very much, with concrete threads connecting and interconnecting the smallest hamlet with the hugest megalopoli. In the year 2000, for example, an ordinary citizen in a jetflitter could race abreast of the solar shadow westward from Charleston to San Francisco, all the way blasting along over one, multilevel, 20-lane freeway trench. If one wished to outrun the solar sweep, it was a simple matter of notching the throttle to faster speed. The same sun that had warmed the backs of dinosaurs now warmed and powered millions of solar-cell housing billets. And, the same sun that rode over the Mexican Cession of 1848 now held its place daily, and ever so briefly, over the San Andreas Canyon. Now, in the year 2073, the vegetation was taking over once more. The Atlantic Seaboard, from Maryland south to Florida, and west to the Appalachians, was carpeted in kudzu. A 1700's footpath might become an 1800's trail, a 1900's rutted road, an asphalt two-lane, a concrete expressway, an elevated plasticrete tunnel-chute, a 20-lane trench, and then be covered by the incredibly tough vines and leaves of the kudzu. No steel tower, no superstructure, no bonded chassis, no airframe could approach the strength and resiliency of the kudzu. New England had become one small, antiquated, open-air museum, and the Middlewest wheatbelts alternately burned huge surpluses and inflated huge losses in parity. Individual states became duchys after the Russian Demonstration War of 1990: the Byrds took Virginia, Eastland took Mississippi, and the Rockefellers all of New York, New Jersey, West Virginia, and portions of Ohio. The deep South became the Black Confederation, with Dizzy Gillespie cloned as the wildly garbed King, set on a throne in New Orleans. The Italian and Jewish family-conglomerates fought brave and mighty fiscal battles against the oil-rich Arabs, but the titanic proxy battle was more apparent than real, the Arabs finally buying out vast blocks of the western U.S.. Bill Harrah's Las Vegas auto collection became a birthday present for a 12-year-old sheik. Back in Washington, DC, the Council of Anarchy withdrew into exile, after issuing the Sink or Swim Manifesto of 1990, which returned all federal powers to the states. The Consumer Depression and Famine followed, and it was only the Aryan Plan of 1991 that saved the population from civil war and starvation. The Germans, Japs, and Arabs agreed to barter for food-cube distribution rights in the U.S., and the day was saved, as it were, in humiliation, but satiety

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also. The food-cube, the nutritional spansule, became the unit of viability, this a densely compressed cube of fiber, soy, carbohydrate, protein, and amino acids. Any ugly, fat, libertine U.S. citizen could pop one in his mouth and be gloriously sated for several days. The hugely complex logistics of food preparation and distribution gave way to the simple visual-motor act of popping a single pill down a gullet. So, while crops rotted and cattle died, U.S. citizens flocked to their abandoned post offices to receive the precious food pellets. The Germans, Japanese, and Russians staged vast reconnaissance missions over the U.S. in satellites and manned aircraft, and some limited, exploratory, land "invasions" occurred. But, the Big Three, as they called themselves, solemly declared that they had no wish to invade the country nor to pillage it to any great extent. The Japs took the gold from Fort Knox, melted it down, and constructed a 100-foot-high buddha for the city of Hiroshima. The Russkies took their booty in slave-labor conscriptees, and the Germans maintained that the U.S. had no redeeming features and that they wanted nothing from it. Abandoned, forsaken by beneficent Uncle Sam, and left to their own duchy-rights devices, the country jelled fairly quickly into tenuously autonomous territories, stripped of military potentials, and constrained to hammer out the most rudimentary levels of social control. Florida was awarded to Cuba by the Russians, and the Florida Jews were teleported to Israel, which had grown into a second Garden of Eden under the sustained agrarian programs of its leaders. The Mideast oil dried up and the new unit of fuel became the cobalt crystal, a nondecaying molecular unit that seemed to defy the law of the conservation of energy. There were two constants that continued to nourish the earth: solar radiation and photosynthesis, and that was all that was needed.

"Come away with me," Clem whispered in Dora's ear.

"But there's no place to go, dear," she returned the whisper.

"Then we will have to kill Hiram."

"That is an option, but I am not given to homicide. Life is the only thing any of us have." Clem moved so that his face lay buried in her neck.

"I don't want to become a fool," he said, softly. "Unless he dies or I die, I am cast in the role of a buffoon. If only he had been killed instead of your dog."

"Do you think he truly knows it was you who loosed the boulder?"

"It was a desperation move," Clem said, almost sobbing, and drawing Dora closer to him. "God, the rock could have hit you." There was a long silence. "I teleported to Harold's drunken party a split microsecond after. There's no way to tie me to the incident. But Hiram's got some kind of crazy-accurate intuition, he's got a

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sixth sense." Dora kissed him deeply, claimingly. "Hush now," she breathed. "I'm sure he buys my story about a Malibu jock cutting loose the rock. Maybe I can get on a polyandry roster, that would give us more free access to each other."

"But I want you all to myself."

"Yes, dear, I know, and I want you."

"Then it's settled, we'll apply for monogam status."

"The council won't approve it, you know that. We have the commune to think about. There's already too many monogam pairs here, there just aren't enough women to go around. But, my dear, you have the teleporter, remember? And no one knows you have it except me. I've been trying to think through a plan that will be foolproof, some plan in which we can use the teleporter to get what we want. But I'm not sure what it is we want. There are days when I think staying alive is the only true goal we have."

"But life is meaningless without love, and my life is meaningless without you."

"Come now, you sound positively romantic. Much as I would like to indulge in the pretty little rituals of love, I see it as a brief, sometime luxury. Our lives have been reduced to primary needs."

"If I sound romantic, that sounds cold."

"We will continue to have our moments of warmth." They writhed slowly, fitting themselves together carefully, and lay still. Clem felt the somesthetic presence of the teleport pak, shallow in his latissimus, fluxed there like a bionic implant. It was a great secret to carry such a device, a device that could transport him to places up to 50 miles from the keying-in point. As teleporters went, it was a very short-range one, but it was the only one he knew about the entire area. He had taken it from the body of a Russian soldier, and because it was barely the size of a food-cube, decided to keep it rather than turn it in. Because he was rarely alone, he had used it but little. But he felt massively confident because of it. Its power amounted to an instant disappearing act, a sure-fire means of escape, given as few as one or two seconds to set the position vectors and depress the activator key. Clem dozed in Dora's arms and dreamed of Bilbo Baggins' magic ring.

"Time to go," Dora whispered. "The nightwatch will wonder why you're not in your burrow."

"Yes," Clem murmured, "we may as well be living in a fishbowl."

"I'll lay the eggs and you spray the milt," she whispered, and there was playful urgency in her tone.

"I've set the telly for my burrow. Kiss me now, I want to leave with that memory." He extracted the teleport pak and held it in his hand. They fell into yet another embrace. Clem pressed the key and disappeared. Instantly

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he was in his own quarters, seven burrows south, and two levels down.

"Who the hail sez ah got to go to Scottsdale wif Clem Simpson?" Hiram was fuming as he tied his chukker boots with rawhide strips. "You know ah got bad-blood feelin's for him." The council had met, checked out the truffle area, and concluded that there was indeed a large supply feeding and growing on the roots of the giant exfoliated trees.

"The council says so," Hank said. "You and Clem have got to bury the hatchet. You're the two best men we have. We can't have you feuding."

"Then you oughta keep him away from me."

"We voted, damnit. It was unanimous. Clem'll drive the stage and you'll ride shotgun."

"Ah gotta take keera little Clemmy, eh?" Hiram zipped his fresh safari suit, patted his twin phasers in their holsters, and clapped on a jungle camouflage hat. Clem walked onto the ancient copter deck. "Ain't you a pretty sight?" he exclaimed to Hiram, trying for some level of crude camaraderie. "You even got on clean clothes!"

Hiram shook his head in a gruff manner. "You better be up to the job today," he sounded commanding. "Don't stray too far from your big daddy Hiram. Hank here sez the council wants me to take keera you today. You sure you know the way to Scottsdale?"

"I could fly it blind," Clem said, airily, not nettled by the barbs, "but I'm damn glad you're going with me." Hiram said nothing, but seemed to soften a bit. The sun had boomed up, bold and red and merciless, and the two men could see the pores on each others' faces as well defined as moon craters. The flitter was ready on the pod above, and the men were awaiting the signal that the spore level was safe.

"Your contact man is a guy named Tom Barrett," Hank said, handing Clem a packet. "Here's the transcript of my call to him. There's alternate flight plans and weather readouts. It'll be mostly desert. The big teleporter's not enough for range. You can keep the flit right at top speed, I guess, shouldn't be a bad trip. You've been there before."

"There's a good bunch of guys holed up at Imperial Dam," Clem said. "Might drop down there, it's not too far to the south. Used to make the trip by following the Gila River, and the old railroad route is even straighter. Any way you look at it, there's barely a bleaker stretch of country anywhere around."

"That very fact may make you vulnerable," Hank said. "There's a lot of satellite coverage in the area, and our scanners have picked up some pockets of action. Nomads probably, we don't know, it could be dangerous."

"Takin' a shit is dangerous," Hiram scoffed. "Besides, 'cept for the fat cats

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at Scottsdale, the whole Arizona territory is crawlin' with Indians. There's whole towns with nary a white face to be seen." Hiram scuffed his boots on the deck, like a bull pawing dirt. He seemed edgy, anticipatory, on his toes, almost too ready. He was like a pistol with a filed down sear, overly triggered, too prone to fire. Clem sat on a crate and stoked up his squat bulldog pipe, a $200 Five-Star Lee, liberated from a Palm Springs tobacconist shop.

The Capistrano people scuttled along their walkways, carrying trash to the central chute on the lowest deck. The toilet facilities were also on the lowest deck, and they were like no others in the world. A placid citizen could ease himself down over one of the plush commodes (liberated from Caesar's Palace) and loose an excremental trophy into deep space, straight down, with allowance for drift. The totally free excreta might fall a mile before splatting to rest. No one was certain how deep the canyon actually was. The best guesses were three, four, five thousand feet, and to defecate into a mile-deep bowl was somesthetically unique. On level A, burrow 4, a busty woman in a heavy velvet dress began to sing aria scales, her strong voice beamed at the stark new geologic canyon walls. Annie was rocking in her chair, humming *The Streets of Laredo*. At the far end of the Capistrano structure, two young boys bounced and swayed against the protective chain-link fence, joyously confident of their safety, adjacent to the awful depths of the canyon. Nearby, two other children scurried up a pair of thick ropes, their small hands closing over the huge knots like grasping apples. A radio set blared ancient acid-rock from an unseen burrow, another gave out weather satellite reports, and yet another purred maudlin hymns and muted muzak themes. And, on the surface above, the siren sounded.

Clem and Hiram responded like fighters in their corners, Hiram making a move as if to insert a protective mouthpiece. Hank walked between the two men as they approached the main ladder, an excellent metal structure taken from a space station. He clapped them both on the shoulder, trying by the degree of contact to impart equal good wishes to the two. "Good hunting," he said, "remember you two are the best we've got here, we need you back in one piece. Beam in on us every so often, and we'll keep you tracked on the scanners." The men nodded and began to move up the ladder quickly, skillfully, like high-wire performers moving into position for their dangerous act. At the same time, Search and Seizure team No. 7 began their ascent, and there were the regular sounds of encouragement, exhortation, cheering, joking, and goodbyes.

Dora stayed in her cave and did not say goodbye to either Clem or Hiram. After all, the teams left every day, the danger was always the same, there was nothing different today. Except that

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her two men were together. Dora lay on a pallet and looked at the tapestries on her wall: thrusting unicorns, burgeoning foliage, extravagant birds and shiny green serpents convoluted on heavy branches. It was a Garden of Delights scene. What a wonderful place to live, she thought, there in the tapestry, what a thick rug of grasses, what leaves and buds and blossoms, what soft sunlight and warmth—but, then, it's all woven! God, she realized, it's nothing more than a picture made of coarse cloth. She turned from the picture to reach for her marijuana pipe. She heard the cheers of the people above as the flitter with Clem and Hiram lifted off for Scottsdale.

On the surface, the day was clear and not yet very hot. The humidity was so low as to defy measurement; yet the sky had a clear, wet-blue, washed look about it. There were no clouds to be seen, and, far to the east, the details of the Castle Dome mountains stood out in marvelous stereoscopic detail. Clem sat in the control cockpit of the delta-wing flitter, an old monocoque-bodied craft, all silver and fading in shininess, its twin drive-units underslung like huge boxes. The appearance of the old craft had earned it the affectionate nickname of A Cobra Towing Two Orange Crates. Hiram sat in the observation turret behind Clem and began the first slow 360-degree sweep.

"How high you want to fly?" Clem asked, and Hiram waited a long time before answering. It was a silent gruffness he was able to project, a silence that gave him a temporary shading of dominance.

"Clear as it is, 'bout three thousand," he said, trying to make his voice sound casually authoritative. He had never been able to routinely dominate Clem. There was something about Clem, some quiet sense of command, something a man learns early and never loses, a sense of steady eye-contact perhaps, a half-smile, a condescension that was as difficult to pinpoint as it was clear in its effect.

"Three it is," Clem replied, easing the flit into a steeper climb. "It's clear enough to see the wrens nesting in the cactus. I'm going to slot in automatic and take a little snooze." Hiram didn't like that.

"You gonna *sleep?* Whatsa matter, you stay up too late last night?" There was no playfulness in his tone; it was partly his basal manneristic nuance and partly an interrogatory stance that Clem found himself more attuned to than usual. Clem's immediate flash was that Hiram knew about his relationship with Dora. He decided to play it macho.

"Manuel and I fell over to the whorehouse and had a go at the bionic beauties last night, if that's what you mean."

"Screwin's supposed to make you sleep good," the reply was double-edged.

"So's brandy. You hit the sack ear-

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ly? I remember you saying you had to go to bed. You weren't in any great shape for screwing."

"Dora's havin' her period," Hiram lied, and Clem mentally slapped his thighs and guffawed silently. Why should the old bastard lie to me, he thought, and why come right out and tie it in with something as personal as menstruation. Then he remembered that he had lied about going to the whorehouse with Manuel, but decided to rub it in anyway.

"What's a little blood between friends?" he said airily. "I even dig it every so often, it puts an edge on your SM." Hiram didn't know what SM stood for, and he didn't like Clem's question about the blood. It implied that he was being told by Clem when it was okay for him to make it in the sack with Dora. Clem decided to push it further.

"You and Dora—I lose track of people—you and Dora are not monogam, are you?"

"Naw, but she's mah woman," Hiram replied, quickly.

"You mean she's not on the commune roster?"

"She is, but she don't wanta be. Lak ah toal you, she's *mah* woman." It was as if Hiram were saying all the wrong things for some kind of vague hyperbolic effect, as if he might will something true by saying it over and over. Clem decided to let it drop, to shelve the matter. The mission was the important thing. The flitter leveled off at 3000 feet, and Clem coded in a crow-flight azimuth for Scottsdale. He filled his pipe with champagne-flavored tobacco and lit it. Clem clacked his first horehound lozenge of the day and put the zoom-lens down on a derelict plane on the desert floor, a huge C-5A, only slightly damaged. The sands were beginning to form drifts beneath the cigar-fat fuselage. The Gila River cut a merciful watery line in the baked earth, and the ancient railroad tracks were visible a mile off. Clem leaned back and closed his eyes. "Hiram, we used to be friends," he began, not sure where the talk might lead. "What's happened to you lately? You're cranky as a bear. And, frankly, you're not thinking straight, it seems to me."

"A man does what he can," Hiram snapped, and Clem thought that was a reasonable response off the top of his hat. "Ah ain't no spring chicken no more. You jes' fly thissear plane. We doan need to talk none."

"Yeah, but you're getting things screwed up in your mind. Maybe you ought to go see the doc—"

"You jes' worry 'bout your *own*self, thet'l keep you busy. Ah'l take kerra me."

"You've been topside when the spore-count was too high; that'l kill you quick." Hiram did not reply. He was completing the first visual scan.

"First look-see okay," he said, "nary a thing stirrin'."

"Set second scan for half-speed rotation," Clem said, militarily. Hiram

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knew that "Aye, aye, sir" was the routine reply, but no power on earth could have made him snap-to in that manner. He didn't care if Clem *was* in charge of the mission.

"Thought you was gonna snooze."

"Yeah. I will, later. How'd the truffles hold up?"

"Good. Ah got um packed in mulch."

"Barrett already said he wanted them."

"All we gotta do now is drive a good bargain."

"Shouldn't be too hard. We've got something they want, and they've got something we want."

"Yeah, but we need clothes a helluva lot more than they need truffles."

"Maybe so, maybe not. The things that are important to them would surprise the hell out of a lot of people. We're barely making it in the canyon, we're survival-oriented. The Scottsdale people have to look out for boredom. They have so much they have to innovate ways to use up goods and services." The men lapsed into silence. The flitter sang through the clear bright sky at a relaxed 200 mph. The soft whir of the rotating observation turret undergirded the sporadic hum and crackle of the telecom audio. Clem smoked and twirled the ends of his mustache into small arcs. He patted the teleporter in its fleshy latissimal niche and mentally sorted through the sequence of love-making from the night before. As sharp-edged and compelling as it had been, it was difficult to recapture now.

"Very damn big satellite, three o'clock high," Hiram grunted, and Clem looked up. It was one of the super skylabs that had been orbiting at 50,000 feet, some for as long as fifty years. It was more like flying than orbiting, but the fuel cells had antigrav features that very few people could understand, so that escape from gravitational pull was no obstacle; indeed, it was the principle of the drive system itself. The satellite was huge, big as a tennis court, like some giant onyx paper weight, spiked with antenna and solar-screen dishes.

"It'll make a hell of an impact when it finally comes down," Clem said.

"Yeah, ah bet thet thang glides laka rock."

"You ever hitch a ride on one?"

"Yeah, we liberated some good stuff from one, years ago." Hiram felt a glimmer of camaraderie but pushed it back. He had found a large cache of drugs on a skylab and had bartered them off for other things over a long period of time.

"Like trying to hitch a ride on a roller coaster, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it won't no easy job."

"You want to smoke?"

"Naw." More minutes of silence slid past. Both men felt a vague pressure that seemed to indicate their need to straighten things out between them. Clem felt a slight edge of domin-

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ance, and Hiram a slight loss. He could fairly well bull his way with most people, but now his bluster was beginning to dilute his credibility in the commune. He was becoming something of a local curiosity.

"There's the Amtrak wreck from '98," Hiram said, pointing down. Clem looked down to see the partially derailed line of copper-colored cars, telescoped, segmented, dented, just faintly askew on the ribbon of ancient railroad track, the shallow drifts and dunes building up around it.

"Hey," Clem said, "can you picture how it must have been when iron horses—when steam locomotives ran along those very same tracks—say, 200 years ago? God, can you imagine, a horizontal steam boiler, hand-fed with wood and coal, and cast-iron rods driving cast-iron wheels?"

"Yeah, ah seen pitchers ovum—hey; a mag jet! Nine o'clock! How the hell he get there so fast?" Clem snapped his head to port and saw the beautiful magnum jet, not 100 yards off, level, matching speed with the flitter. The craft was glazed a gaudy burnt yellow, flared with a single, horizontal, red pinstripe. The slender, projectile-like fuselage narrowed forward to a black needlenose, and a rakish, tall rudder was aft. The wings were set at right angles to the fuselage and the dihedral was upswept. Clem saw the plane immediately as the toy of some rich Scottsdale resident.

"Tally-ho, truffle bird!" a loud voice sang through the telecom, and the taunting of the voice was subtle, but unmistakable. "Scottsdale Golden Eagle here. Come to see you in, old fellow. Trust you have the comestibles. Over."

"See you bright and clear, Eagle," Clem said, matching and neutralizing the elusive taunt with a no-nonsense tone. "Quite a ship you're riding. Things must be good in Scottsdale. You sure you can fly slow enough to synch in with me?"

"With a bit of effort, cave dwellers," the voice came back. The pilot was a stocky-looking man of fifty or so, his face deeply tanned, bright blonde hair curling down over his shoulders.

"We have truffles," Clem said, "We come bearing gifts." Hiram didn't like the remark about bearing gifts.

"Splendid," Golden Eagle said, "just splendid. That pleases me." Hiram didn't like that remark either. What did he care about pleasing a rich, fat Scottsdale trillionaire. Clem remained silent.

"Touchdown in half an hour, give or take a bit. Tom will ring you up for a local flight code. I'll fly you a distant wing. I am assuming your, ah, craft, is airworthy. Tah-tah now." The mag jet peeled off with such a snap that Clem expected the wings and stabs to break off.

"Tah-tah, mah ass," Hiram muttered.

"Roger, Golden Eagle," Clem said,

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cutting the circuit. "Don't get touchy with these people, Hiram. These Scottsdale cats are fat in a lot of ways. Best thing for you to do is pay them no mind."

"Thet guy an' his piss-colored jet. Ah bet he's soft as lard."

"Do you see him now?"

"Yeah. Eight o'clock high, barely make him out."

"That's the most expensive wing man we'll ever have." Hiram bit down on a lozenge and said nothing. The flitter bore on through the clear bright sky, the desert beneath relatively featureless. Clem smoked, touched his teleporter spot, twirled his mustache, and thought of Dora. Hiram glowered up at the mag jet, a bold and tiny yellow dot far off. He snorted, popped in another horehound drop, and thought about Dora. She's mah woman, he said to himself, goddamnit, she is. She better be.

"Hi-ho, Truffle Service," Tom Barrett's syrupy voice bloomed on the audio, "Big Tom here, we have you on video, how goes it, fellows?" He did not bother to say "over." Clem smiled, waited ten seconds, and flipped the transmitter.

"Truffle Bird here. We're fine as silk. Point me at your strip."

"Look out for the kids, they're out in absolute droves today, and a playful bunch they are. You'll get buzzed, of that I'm certain." Hardly had this message come through when a group of four flitters appeared dead ahead.

"Packa little flits twelve o'clock," Hiram shouted. "They're too damn close for comfort, look out for 'em—"

"I see them. They're going to buzz us, sit tight." The echelon broke four ways and the tiny planes shot past the flitter on all sides.

"Damn," Hiram snorted, "whut thuh hail they think they doin'?" He had an ancient memory engram of wood and silkspan biplanes making machine-gun passes at a gorilla atop a skyscraper.

"Kid's play," Clem said, "little gnats buzzing around our heads." He flicked the audio open. "Big Tom, this is Truffle Bird. Your high-spirited pediats just shot by. I am going to assume they know some archaic principles of air safety." Hiram liked that remark. "Yeah, lak stayin' outta thuh way," he muttered.

"They're playful, but quite expert, I assure you," Tom Barrett laughed. "You must realize, Truffle Bird, that you're jockeying a real antique there. The kids have never seen anything quite like your flitter, except in museums, or in old videocubes. You're a conversation piece, what! Well! Here's a bit of landing pattern for you: twenty degrees port for ten miles and a three-degree trajectory—*down*, of course, hah-hah. You'll see our strip. It's lined with palms and century plants. Over."

"Roger, Big Tom." Clem began to turn and the four pediatric flitters flew in close around, waggling their wings

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and waving. Clem lifted his hand to them and Hiram glowered. The desert now gradually gave way to huge electromagnetic golf courses, vast green fairways, where players in bright clothing replayed famous golfing contests of the past. A mediocre golfer could program a Nicklaus regime and hit booming 350-yard drives, sink 50-foot putts, and end up six under par. Scottsdale was rimmed, encircled by these elaborate golfing areas. The flitter whistled down to 150 mph and eased into the landing pattern. The golf courses behind, there were large sprawling adobe buildings, the golf country clubs. There were swimming pools everywhere: turquoise-colored water in rectangles, squares, ellipses, kidney-shaped, some even in hearts and in initials. And everywhere lay the marvelous carpet of photosynthetic green, the wondrous epithelial layer of individual grass shoots and feelers and tendrils, each sending its blade up into the sunlight, pulling in the rays, breathing with its trillions of emerald brothers, turning and bending and writhing in the heliotropic symphony. Then there were streets of white shell, streets of amber mosiac, silicon-smooth trenchways, boulevards with orchids blooming in the median strip, palm-lined avenues, triple-deck freeways, labyrinthine lines, aviaries, botanical gardens, fountains, mobiles, statues, pedestrian malls, waterways, reservoirs, cactus plots, and opaque domes. Far in the center of the concentric city Clem could see the quartz monoliths of the government center, like perfect crystal bars erupting from rich alluvial crusts. "I see the strip," Hiram said to Clem. "God, it's wide enough for us and the flits on both sides." And that is how they landed. The flitter came in low over a mile-long lake of the purest blue and lowered onto the plasticrete runway. The pediat flits touched down, two on either side, the mag jet close behind, too close, Hiram thought. The runway looked endless, and the palms soared high, bordered on the ground by elephant ears, Spanish daggers, and century plants. There was not a single skidmark or even a fleck of grit on the runway. It was a plush new world, a world of opulent clarity, sweet breezes, deeply saturated colors, a controlled world, washed, aerated, nourished, polished, ordered, plotted out, systematized, codified, not a noxious stimulus to be seen.

"Graceful old bird." Barrett's voice came through. "We'll have to give you something better to fly home in, hey? Now, do you see my flagstaff—the green one at ten o'clock? Secure there, a car will be waiting for you. And do bring the goodies, fellows."

"Roger, Mr. Barrett."

"God," Hiram incredulated, "this place is so clean ah jes' may hev to throw up on it." Clem looked to port to begin the turn for the flagstaff, and the four pediat flits suddenly blasted ahead and took off. They eased into a

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tight diamond formation, and then the planes stood on their tails and climbed up out of sight. The mag jet rolled behind, then turned away to starboard. An antique Mercedes 600 was parked at the base of the flagstaff, and two casually dressed men were in the front seat, talking to each other. They did not look around as the flitter rocked to a gentle stop, and the engines began their long decremental sigh into silence.

"Let me do most of the talking," Clem said, trying to make it sound acceptable to Hiram. "These people are friendly, or at least they're not enemies, but they are in a position to call most of the shots, too. So try not to make any of them mad, okay?"

"Jes' you doan take no shit offum," Hiram grunted, "an' doan lettum take us into their work force—God, thet'll be hail."

"We've got immunity, don't worry, that's been taken care of. But listen to me, there's different rules here. I'm telling you the very best thing you can do is button your lip. Stay busy sucking those horehound drops and you'll be better off." Hiram grunted and was silent. Clem irised the cockpit canopy open and the pure air flowed in. He smelled jasmine and honeysuckle. He climbed out and vaulted lightly to the ground. The surface seemed to yield optimally to his impact. Hiram exited through the belly-plate, then stood up again to get the bag of truffles, his torso disappearing briefly into the opening. He ducked out from under the plane and blinked in the pure bright sunlight. He had an ancient memory engram of ragtag buffalo hunters standing on a fashionable San Francisco street corner. He stretched and shook himself. The driver of the Mercedes reached to open one of the back doors and then resumed his talk with the other man. Clem got in first, then Hiram. Hiram closed the door harder than necessary and the driver flinched. The divider window between the driver's seat and the rear was closed. The seats were of soft black leather and luxuriously comfortable. The air conditioning was perfect and totally silent. The fittings on the doors and divider panel were rosewood and chrome over brass and fine leather.

"Beats enathang ah evah saw," Hiram said, and his voice sounded harsh and salivary and somehow rural in the controlled silence. The car began to move, and the driver spoke into a mike without looking back at Clem and Hiram. The other man gave them a brief look, as if to check the baggage.

"Have a drink, cave dwellers," the driver said, and a bar compartment opened, revealing a crystal decanter and two heavy glasses. "Have a good flight?" Hiram reached immediately for the decanter and poured a drink. It was 35-year-old scotch, smooth as silk, but Hiram was puzzled by its excellence.

"Good flight," Clem said.

"Mr. Barrett's compound's a ten-

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minute spin. Relax, be there in a jiff." The car purred along beautiful streets, lined with mansions and luxuriant foliage. The very barks of the trees looked perfect, not a scar or a dead leaf or a bent branch or an exposed root. Clem sipped his drink and felt the wide trail of warmth down his throat and thorax and stomach. Hiram held the bag of truffles in one hand and the drink in the other. He had a memory-engram of a Russian peasant holding a coarse sack of potatoes as he sat nervously in a crowded wooden railway coach. Hiram also found himself wanting to steal the beautifully faceted whiskey glass.

Tom Barrett was the honorary mayor of Scottsdale. He owned 700 antique cars, large tracts of land and buildings, mineral and water rights, and a stock portfolio that had miraculously survived several economic crises. He had bartered portions of his art collection for a huge supply of cobalt cubes, and thereby became a prime supplier of energy. The economy of Scottsdale was controlled and ritualistic and based on these miracle cobalt cubes. A cube of high kilovolt-ampere rating in the service core of a house could supply every index of energy indefinitely. Although the food supply was basically protein cubes and soya-based synthetes, a large amount of fresh and lab-grown fruit and vegetables was available, as well as varieties of animal and human flesh. A special lab bred the suckling pigs and unborn lambs so dear to the palates of the gourmet group, and there were vast supplies of wines and liquors. The Mercedes with Clem and Hiram drinking in the posh passenger compartment now pulled into a pale yellow driveway and moved slowly under a canopy of lace-like trees that Clem could not recognize. The car stopped at the front of a low, square adobe building, and Barrett himself was there to open the car door. He was fiftyish, tan, square-jawed, gray-haired, handsome, vital, supremely confident. Clem slid out and Barrett extended his hand. Hiram scuttled out and stood looking like a gunfighter in the open street of a cowtown. His handshake is limp, Clem thought, the condescending clasp of the rich. "Tom Barrett here," he said, "welcome cave dwellers, hardy folk that you are, the last of the pioneers, and all that. Come *in*, come right on *in*." He fairly grabbed Hiram's hand and shook it, the enforced handshake a subtly purposeful insult. They entered the building and followed Barrett down a dark, cool hallway, lined with statuary and paintings in ornate frames. There was a dry, cool, insulated silence in the house, a silence that Hiram felt as eerie. A predatory-looking boy of about ten years watched the group from behind a statue, then went to his room to watch the meeting on video. They entered a laboratory-like room, but with a large, formal-looking conference table in the center, the piece out of context with

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the other shelves and racks and instruments. Clem recognized a teleporter-transporter shell in a corner. Barrett motioned them to seats by the table as he keyed up the lighting.

"Well, boys," he said, reaching for a magnifying glass and a tensor light, "let's see what you've brought me." Hiram set the bag down on the table.

"You want 'em on thissear perty table? They're rot dirty and packed in mulch."

"No matter, let's have a look." Hiram emptied the truffles and the mulch out onto the table, and Barrett bent to examine one of the black spheres. A stereo played paso dobles, and the low-volume reverberation convinced Clem that there was a real orchestra somewhere in the house.

"Truffles!" Barrett's voice was intent, almost reverent, "how long has it been since I've seen *truffles?* You have a rare find here, my cave-dwelling friends, a good and rare find indeed." Hiram winced slightly as Barrett sectioned one of the specimens with a knife. He examined it, held it up to the light, held the tensor beneath, then put it under a microscope.

"Those wretched Russian spores is what we have to look for," he said, bending in to adjust the eyepiece. "They'll rue the day, for absolute certain. You say these come from a contaminated area? I suppose they do."

"On the fringe of one," Clem said, "but the spore count rarely gets very high there."

"Heavens but you people live in wretched enough straits as it is. I don't see how you abide it."

"There are balances," Clem said, "checks and balances and rewards."

"Not the least of which is your alleged freedom, I should say."

"Yeah, we're free as birds," Hiram put in, "but we doan hev no good clothes. Thet's why we're here, to git some *clothes.* Thet's what we come for." Barrett sniffed at a truffle section and put it to his tongue.

"That's just ghastly," he said. "No, not the taste," and he laughed at Clem's and Hiram's facial cues of concern, "the fact that you live in such harsh settings is what is ghastly. However can you abide scavenging a few hours in daylight, and then slinking down into holes at night? That's just ghastly." He continued to examine the sectioned truffle.

"Beats the hail outta bein' roped into some work force," Hiram said, "a man's gotta stay free. Bein' free is what's good."

"And you and your Capistrano family have freedom, but insufficient garments, is that it?" Barrett's voice was cavalier and curiously lilting.

"En yawl got insuffichunt trufflebawls."

"By jove, you have a bit of equivocality there," Barrett laughed, "though we Scottsdalians are quite unaccustomed to people telling us of our deficits."

"Are they all right?" Clem asked

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Barrett, flashing a dark look at Hiram, a look that said be quiet. Barrett continued examining the specimens, unhurriedly.

"So far, so good. We can surely swap you some clothing for them. It only remains to establish an exchange rate."

"We figger thum thar is worf twenny old U.S. dollars apiece."

"Yes, but the U.S. dollar is indeed quite old, as you rightly state. Obsolete, I should say. Our currency base is cobalt cubes. And what is the Capistrano unit?"

"We have no unit as such," Clem replied, "we scavenge, and we barter—"

"How about the brandy?" Hiram asked Clem, and Clem wished he would shut up.

"Brandy is highly prized in our group," Clem said to Barrett, "but it is not a true unit of currency. We use direct barter."

Barrett sat back and rubbed his hands.

"Jolly good system. Quaint, really. Well, then! Truffles for clothes, clothes for truffles. Garments for fungi-balls — what a unique economic paradigm! What say we try a simple, one-for-one ratio, fellows. One complete garmentage unit per single truffle. I should think that's eminently fair."

"One suita clothes for one truffle?" Hiram asked.

"Yes, my dear fellow, correct."

"Do you standardize a garmentage unit?" Clem asked.

"Yes. Bodyskin isomorph, podiatric sheaths, tunic, leggings, and chapeau."

"May we see an example?"

"Most assuredly. I have a unit right here." Barrett placed a small cylinder on the table. He opened one end and emptied the contents. Several small rolls of material fell out.

"What thuh hail is thet?" Hiram asked, clacking his horehound drop loudly, "looks laka buncha wimmen's stockin's."

"This is our basic garmentage unit," Barrett said.

"Well, if it is, you can damn well keep it—"

"Wait, Hi," Clem interrupted, and then to Barrett: "You must excuse him, he is outspoken."

"Obviously. Perhaps he would prefer to wait elsewhere. His verbal inputs are becoming non facilitory. He is what we term an anarchronism, a primitive. We have some primitives in our zoos."

"I order you to be silent," Clem said to Hiram.

"But them's *mah* truffles!"

"They are commune property. I am ordering you to be silent."

"Yes, old fellow," Barrett said, "you're not helping things at all, you know. Your diplomacy is really quite marginal."

"Them ain't no suita clothes!"

"Wait in the flitter, Hi. That is a direct order. Mr. Barrett, can you zap

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Hiram back to the flitter with your transporter?"

"Of course I can. I would be pleased to do that." Barrett nodded toward the transporter shell in the corner of the room. Clem took Hiram by the arm and felt the immediate resistance to the contact.

"Now wait," Hiram protested, "You gonna git screwed."

"No, I'm not. These are body isomorph sets, I tell you. They're the most advanced type of clothing known." Hiram yielded grudgingly to Clem's guiding him into the transporter shell.

"Ah doan lak this," Hiram said, and Clem realized he sounded a little drunk. "Ah wants me some new climbin' shoes, en some brogans, and mackinaw—"

"You just wait in the flit, and stay out of trouble."

"You short-sell us and you gonna be in trouble." Hiram stood in the transporter shell and Clem stepped back. Barrett quickly set the coordinates for the flagstaff location and activated the controls. Hiram stood ramrod straight, shimmered briefly in the atomic reappropriation matrix, and disappeared. The young boy came into the room. He was stocky, square-headed, blonde, predatory looking. "That man is an anachronism, is he not?" the boy asked Barrett, casually. "I've been watching him on the videos." The boy's easy sense of territoriality impressed Clem and made him wary also. The boy regarded Clem hardly at all.

"Yes, he is an interesting humanoid throwback, son," Barrett said to the boy. "Now, where were we, ah, Simpson?"

"I should like to have him for my zoo," the boy said, "and is this fellow also an anachronism? He seems far better than the other." The boy gave Clem a detached nod, looking all the while at Barrett.

"I'm sure I don't know," Barrett sighed. "He chooses to live in a cave, if that is any measure."

"Well, I want them in my zoo, so may I have them?"

"We'll see. Now run along, Daddy's busy." Clem's wariness increased, and he felt again for his own teleporter, the touch reassuring to him. These two people, the fiftyish man and the ten-year-old boy, seemed to be casually sizing him up like so much fodder, like meat in a butcher shop, like products on a shelf.

"I want something besides Indians and wetbacks in my zoo," the boy persisted. "I'm going over to see the old man in his antique flit. I want to inspect him." The boy left the room.

"What's this about a zoo?" Clem asked Barrett, trying to infuse the question with the right mixture of diplomacy and neutral indignation. "I'd advise that the boy not harass Hiram. He's got a short fuse." Barrett looked amused by the comments.

"It's a new fad, the zoo thing. The

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kids have taken to, shall we say, impounding the assorted vagrants in the area. It's really quite harmless. The boy seems to have taken a liking to you two, ah, vagrants. Now, where were we—" Barrett turned to the clothing samples on the table. "I take it you realize the true utilitarian value of these, even though your friend does not?" Clem's thinking raced ahead. He realized that, despite Barrett's cordiality, there was a chance—a random, capricious, outrageous possibility—that he and Hiram might become specimens on display, that they might be impounded in the private zoo of a rich kid. He decided to close the barter deal as quickly as possible and get out. "Yes," he replied to Barrett, trying not to sound rushed. Barrett continued to look at him with the utmost sense of casualness. "If you will transport—what is the number of units—about twenty, I believe, the twenty cylinders to our craft, we'll be off."

Barrett spun his chaise to face a console, punched in some codes, and activated a control.

"Twenty sets of sartorial threads for twenty black fungi-balls—a bit of ancient barter, what!"

"I'd better get cracking. I'd like to avoid any trouble with Hiram and your son."

"Would you now," the question was not really a question. It was subtly declamative, a pseudopodic challenge, a shallow taunt. Clem fixed his eyes on Barrett and probed for some sort of relationship, some inroad of equity, some balance of territoriality. He was beginning to feel trapped.

"Yes. As coarse as he is, Hiram has a particular brand of dignity, an independence, a self-sufficiency that ought to count for something."

"Mercy, but you cave dwellers have archaic value systems. You would make interesting specimens for us to study. But, you have caught me on a good day. I am not inclined to detain you, to toy with you. But you must realize, my flinty, strong-jawed friend, that you and your geriatric partner are helpless here. I could toy with you, if it were my whim."

Clem looked steadily at Barrett. He felt dominant in his general orientation, felt he was a better man than Barrett, whatever that might mean, but he felt unable to draw on his personality strengths, unable to project a resourcefulness that would carry off the barter meeting in a way that would leave a nice, neat resolved interaction. There were elements of danger, face-saving, valor, discretion all mixed.

"We can deliver more truffles," he finally said. "May we have a relationship geared to supply and demand? Keep it simple: clothes for truffles, nothing more."

"You know we could keep the truffles and you and your friend both."

"True."

"And does that not frighten you? Is there no stir of autonomic apprehension in your feelings?"

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"We have to live with fight-or-flight situations every day in the canyon. It is a facilitator of survival. Like it or not, our lives are filled with primitive crises. Our autonomic responses get called on constantly."

"You sound learned. How did you come to live in a cave anyway?" Barrett was beginning to sound mellowed and interested in Clem.

"It was either that or get teleported to Siberia, remember?"

"Ah, yes, the famous—the *infamous*—California Conscription. Well! Enough of this! Yes, my truffle-supplying friend, the excellence of the little black balls you bring constitutes a basis for us having a more or less civil relationship. And, besides, I rather like you. You are, perhaps 200, even 300 years behind the times, but you are an interesting fellow—pioneer stock, I should say. Pity we don't need pioneers anymore."

"That's the breaks," Clem said, and Barrett laughed. He put his arm around Clem's shoulder and began to walk toward the transporter shell. Clem responded to the intrusion on his lifespace with a slight tightening of muscle tonus, and he walked beside Barrett so that he did not feel that he was being steered *by* him. It was a rich and subtle exchange of body language and territoriality. Clem sensed a glimmer of admiration in Barrett's touch.

"I'll see you to your craft," he said. They stood in the shell and disappeared.

"Git this little pincha owlshit away from me," Hiram grumbled to Clem, as he and Barrett materialized beside the flitter. The boy was astride the flitter, his face pressed against the observation turret. He was staring intently at Hiram.

"You fly," Clem shouted up at Hiram. "I'll ride shotgun." Hiram disappeared from view and came out through the belly-plate beneath the flit. "If it's one thang ah cain't abide, itsa smartass kid," he said as he climbed up into the cockpit. The boy slid down on to the wing and continued to stare at Hiram.

"Look out, boy, ah'm firin' the engines." The drive units began their ascending rpm's.

"Get down, Billy," Barrett called to the boy. The boy skittered the full length of the wing and leaped onto the ground. "He's so *funny*," the boy said, "and so hairy, and he has warts and moles and scars, and black lines in his face. He's positively grizzly! Can't I keep him, Dad? Can I? Can I?" Clem tensed up.

"We'll get you another," Barrett said. "This old fellow is a highly skilled cliff dweller, a climber of walls, a scaler of mountains, a man of coarse resolve—"

"I don't understand why I can't have him. And what's owlshit? He said I wasn't worth—whatever was that he said—he said I wasn't worth a pinch of it."

"That is a secret way our men greet

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each other," Clem lied to the boy. "It is our way of projecting camaraderie." He turned quickly to Barrett, nodded, and entered the flitter.

"Wave to the boy," Clem said to Hiram. Barrett and his son backed away as the flit began to move.

"The hail ah will."

"Do it, dammit, he likes you."

"Wail, ah doan lak him."

"I order you to wave at him." Hiram turned and gave the ancient vee for victory sign to the boy, and the boy waved, enthusiastically. The dull silver flit moved into position for take-off. The tires flattened slightly as the drive took hold, and then the craft lifted off into the still brightening sky. The Cobra Towing Two Orange Crates was returning home to its crack in the earth, bearing twenty cylinders of body-stocking clothes.

Ah ain' gone wear no panty-hose clothes," Hiram fumed, looking down at the twenty cylinders on the floor of Hank's burrow. Clem opened one of the containers and the filmy pieces fell out, like so many handkerchiefs. "I agree they don't look like much, but, believe me, they are ideal. Just hold your horses and watch." Clem began to take off his clothing. He stripped naked, and his well-muscled body looked formidable even in the stereotyped vulnerability of being nude. He put on the torso sheath first, and then the leggings. The material stretched, almost miraculously, to form a dimly translucent body isomorph. Surface tension and reverse polarity systems made for an optimal and variable air-space, mediated by galvanic skin response. The selective permeability of the material kept the body temperature constant, so that wearing one of the bodysuits was like having built in air-conditioning and heating. Clem explained the functioning of the unit as he put it on. He pulled on the podiatric sheaths and the hat, which could adhere like a skullcap or be pulled down in any direction to form a hood or cowl or mask. He jogged in place, did some side-straddle hops, and some deep-knee bends.

"I've heard about these for years," Clem said, feeling his arms through the filmy mesh, "but this is the first one I've ever seen. It feels perfect. It's good in 110-degree heat, zero cold, rain, any kind of weather. And it's so light you can't feel any weight at all." Hank began to strip, and so did Manuel and Bob. Clem looked at Hiram in his light-green denim safari suit.

"Come on, Hi, try one."

"Ah ain' wearin' no wimmen's underwear."

"Shit, man, you don't know what's good. I'll just bet you—I'll bet you a whole quart of brandy—that once you try these on, you'll feel like a new man. You'll feel great. Here, try one." Clem lofted one of the cylinders over to Hiram, who started, and caught it. His reflexes flashed a microsecond message

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that the cylinders were akin to nitroglycerine or a sputtering dynamite fuse. Dora entered. She was not at all embarrassed by the macho locker-room scene, but Hiram scowled fiercely and seemed to want to shield her eyes from the sight. He stood there with the cylinder in his hand, the unit like a straight silver cucumber, and then Dora walked over to Clem.

"My, aren't you just the slickest sartorial tiger," she said to him, trailing her fingertip lightly down his deltoid and tricep. Hiram fumed anew at this gesture. Besides, she had ignored him. She hadn't welcomed him back. She had gone to Clem!

"The newest threads from Scottsdale," Clem sang out, striking an affected body-builder pose. "Here, try one." He handed her a cylinder and Hiram's mouth dropped open.

"Hey," Hiram sputtered, and his horehound drop fell out of his mouth. He knelt to pick it up but it was covered with dirt. Dora went to him and hugged him. "You grizzled old bear," she said, affectionately, "you brought us real live isomorph bodysuits! That's wonderful, these are the very best there are!" Hiram was dumfounded and did not speak. Dora began to undress and Hiram began to feel a cataleptic immobility.

"Hey, you cain't do thet!" he finally managed to say.

"Do what, dear?" Dora answered sweetly, pulling her ancient IZOD alligator tennis shirt off over her head. She wore no bra, and her full white breasts were the loveliest of velvet globes.

"For Christ's sake, woman!" Hiram sputtered again, "you cain't git nekkid in here!" He looked around, as if to find something to put around her, some tarpaulin or drape-sheet or even a room divider. She had her back to the others and moved up close to Hiram. She quickly put on the translucent torso sheath.

"Oh, don't be such an old stodge," she teased. "We all know each other. There's nothing wrong with a little innocent nudity among friends."

"But you're mah woman," Hiram said, a bit softly, as if not wanting to broadcast the questionable message. Dora ignored the remark and began to unbutton the cumbersome metal stays on the fly of her faded bluejeans. Hiram steered her over to the darkest corner of the cave and positioned himself so as to block her from the view of the others.

"Oh, stop, silly!" she said, as if addressing a child. "We all belong to each other, you know that." The other men in the cave felt like snickering but decided to humor Hiram. Dora quickly pulled on the leggings and adjusted them up around her waist.

"You're a darling, straight-laced old man," she said. "That's one of the things I love about you. But you're really some sort of Puritan, too. Anyway, you can move now. I'm, ah, *decent*, as the saying goes." The men

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were walking about, a little like strutting peacocks, and a little like terns, lifting their legs carefully and putting them back down. Dora clucked Hiram under the chin. "Now take off that horrible African hunting suit, and try one of these, they're marvelous." She put her arms around his neck, and wriggled her breasts and pelvis against him.

"We'll turn our backs while you change," Manuel teased, and his sing-songy Mexican accent lent a slapstick humor to the scene.

"Let's go try them out," Clem said, and he strode for the cave opening. "Dora, if you can pull it off, get this glorious old warrior to change clothes." He patted Hiram on the shoulder as he left, the others following him out into the late afternoon light.

"Come on, cucumber," Dora said, "get naked."

"You mean you want to do some screwin'?" and a limp asymmetric leer spread over Hiram's face.

"No, of course not. Not now. I want to see how you look in the bodysuit." He grabbed her by both shoulders.

"Whatsa matter wif you, woman? You ain't actin' rot."

"Don't you shake me. I'm not your property. You be good to me or I'll cut you off. Now, are you going to get naked or not? Here, let me help you." Hiram fairly gasped as Dora unzipped his suit from neck to crotch in one rapid motion.

"Christ, be careful woman! Ah did thet oncet and damn near snagged mah dick." Dora pulled the suit down over Hiram's shoulders, freed his arms, and drew it down so that it fell around his ankles. He stood on one leg, and then the other, finally working free of the suit. He looked white and flaccid and vulnerable. Dora handed him the leggings.

"Somethin's crazy here," he said. "Whut's goin' on? How come you actin' this way?"

"I want to redefine our relationship. I don't want to pair off with just one man, it's not fair to the others. There's not enough women to go around. I've been paired with you in violation of our laws. You know that, everybody knows it." Hiram hastily donned the sacral unit and pulled it high up over his waistline.

"There, doesn't that feel good?" Dora thocked him gently on the jockpod and handed him the torso sheath.

"This ain't rot, Dorie," he said, his voice muffled as he pulled the sheath over his head. "You cain't jes' drap me laka hot 'tater ora ole shoe. Ah wants you to be mah woman—hey! You want *Clem*, don't you!" He began to fidget, agitatedly.

"No," she lied, "I just want freedom of choice. I put my name on the polyandry roster, where it's supposed to have been all these past months. Now, really, doesn't that feel good? Now take off those horrid chukker boots

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and try these sheaths. They're like the winged feet of Mercury." Hiram sat down and began to unlace his boots. Dora sat down beside him.

"How does it feel?"

"Rot good," Hiram said, sounding mellower than before, "rot smooth. Say, you sure you're not pairin' off wif thet Clem?"

"Hiram, dear," Dora sounded weary but gentle, "all I'm doing is what the council laws say to do. Monogamy is disallowed, except in a very few cases. We all have to share. We can still lay together, though. You'll just have to wait your turn. Besides, there are more than a few plump young pediatric nymphs around here that you must want to lay with."

"Yeah, ah guess ah do, but it won't be the same as wif you."

"It'll be *better*, you'll see." A group of people fairly burst into the cave. "There they are!" a man shouted, snatched up a cylinder from the floor, and dashed out. The other people scrambled for the remaining cylinders, there was some tugging and shoving, and then the group was gone. They had hardly noticed Hiram and Dora.

It was a full month before the Capistrano people dug up enough truffles to obtain bodysuits for all ninety-seven men, women and children living there. But the quality of the truffles was so good that Tom Barrett agreed to send a craft to pick up subsequent shipments. After the initial scramble for the miracle bodysuits, the council devised a lottery system to distribute the first supply, and after a month, everybody had their own. The people discovered that the suits changed color slightly, as the light and heat around them changed, and that the comfort and protection they afforded was most remarkable. Annie Brown's arthritis took a turn for the better, and she swore it was because the bodysuit made her feel so much like a young woman. Old 300-pound Bill McCall got cured of the chronic sweats; and Ezra, the oldest of all the cave dwellers, began to walk better and claimed his back didn't hurt anymore. It was clear that the bodysuits were something special, something far beyond a simple clothing function. They had the effect of increasing and enriching the wearers' immediate lifespace, the proximal lifespace, and they functioned as a wide-range thermal control, feeling good in any kind of climate. Then Clem discovered something important: the suits seemed to have a true protective function against certain kinds of impact, and they were at least partially flameproof. Hot embers from his pipe had fallen on his thigh, and had burned out without his feeling anything. He had reflexively slapped at his thigh and not felt the expected sting of pain. All protective function of the bodysuits, but in different ways. It was a double-edge sword situation: the suits' im-

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parted a sense of all but hedonistic well-being, at the same time reducing tactile sensitivity to external stimuli. Inside their optimally fitted body-envelopes, the people felt absolutely great. There was a perfect gaseous interface between skin and suit that was marvelous, yet the external environment was more distant, less monitorable. For instance, the suits were no good for sex, because they masked out erotogenic cues. Manuel had tried it, and said it was like trying to screw through two inflated spacesuits. A five-year-old boy fell hard on his face and was not injured, apparently because he was wearing the hat unit pulled down over his face like a mask. The mask had responded to impact valences with some kind of shock-absorbing effect. After thinking on it, Clem decided that the suits might provide protection from the spores. He discussed the idea with Hank and they decided to make a test of it.

Hiram was adjusting well enough to not being paired with Dora, especially since she had seen to it that some of the young nymphs on the roster showed him some extra-innovative rollicking good times. In fact, he was being serviced grandly by a pair of them there in the bordello burrow as Clem and Hank scaled the main ladder to the top of the canyon. The omnipresent updraft from the depths of the crevasse felt stronger than usual that night, and although the spores never floated down into the canyon, tonight they were fairly high in their clouds, and some distance from the canyon rims. Tonight, in the crystal clarity of the evening dusk, the clouds of milky white tufts were a bit like canyon walls themselves, rising 100 feet or so in the air on both sides, like gossamer veils. But they were ugly; this was no sheen of sweet mist, no glistening waterfall, just pasty white wisps of fungi. The guard at the top had been drinking and was not inclined to try to stop Clem and Hank. He thought, what the hell, nobody goes out on the surface anyway when the clouds are this thick. To do so was to invite contamination and death. Besides, the guard knew that Clem and Hank were ranking council members.

"This is a top-priority mission," Clem said to the man. "Keep it under your hat for now. Strictly exploratory. Important."

"God, be careful," the guard replied. "Nobody goes out there when the clouds are that thick. Old Hiram did once or twice, but he had a mask and a diver's suit on." The guard changed the television channel and lay back on his chaise. Clem and Hank checked their suits for total coverage and climbed out onto the white plain.

The toadstools stood like chessmen on a crowded board, like pegs in a form-board, like short trees in a bizarre orchard, like huge clothes pins stuck in rising dough. They were more humanoid than phallic in shape, the crowns like sampan hats, and the

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stalks like torsos. A five-foot specimen nearby made an audible belch, a wet, orificial slurp and emitted its slow-motion effluvia of spores. They cartwheeled, like small starfish stirred in the current, and began to rise. The edge of the cloud was a slight distance away, and Clem and Hank began to walk toward it.

"I just realized," Clem said, "that this isn't a very structured mission. Any ideas? I've got a few."

"Fools rush in," Hank said, after a long pause, "where angels fear to tread. We could walk right in there and find out quick, take the plunge."

"Here," Clem said, uncoiling the light rope he held in his hand, "lash this to my wrist. I'll go in a little at a time. If there's any trouble, you can haul me out." Hank lashed the line. Clem patted the teleporter and decided not to tell Hank he had it. He began to walk toward the cloud. It was remarkably stable, like a huge school of fish suspended in the air, and the wall of spores hung together as if bonded by some reticular matrix. Clem stopped, close beside it, and flicked his finger into the mass. The sticky white tufts moved away from his finger, like ants averting a pebble, like insects feeling pesticide, like a slug drawing away from a hot match. He tried to make contact with the spores, flicking his finger again into the mass, but they fairly darted away, just an inch or so. He slapped at them, slowly, and then more vigorously, and the wispy beige and white tufts of fungi moved so quickly that Clem reasoned some sort of forcefield was emanating from him. The spores were not being blown about, as in a wind; they were skittering and darting like metallic spangles in a magnetic field. He tried to close his hand on a group of them, remembering how he used to catch flies with his hands, but he could not. Growing bolder, but still reluctant to walk into the cloud, he sat down and began to remove one of the foot sheaths. Hank moved up beside him. "How's it look?" he asked.

"Good, so far. Looks like the suits give off some kind of forcefield—some sort of aura. It's a little like being sprayed with pesticide and then walking through a cloud of mosquitoes."

"Or maybe getting coated with oil and vaseline, and swimming the channel."

"Yeah, something like that."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Going to try it barefooted." Hank looked alarmed. "But not by very much." Clem's tone was assuring and playful both. "It'll be a little like putting my foot close to the fire. You watch close, now. If a spore gets to within, say, half an inch of me, you flick it away." The analogy was faulty, but Clem thought of the times he had insinuated his toes carefully against the legs of women in bed and of how certain exquisite orgasms had a toe-curling effect. His posture was anything but heroic, as he remained sit-

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ting, and extended his bare foot close in to the cloud wall. Like testing a hot iron, he thought, and I forgot to spit on my toe.

"It's a damn shame the hand units don't come off, like gloves," he said to Hank, as he nudged his foot closer. "Hey, maybe we can try that later. Maybe we can cut up the basic suits anyway we like." The spores did not adhere in any fashion as Clem edged his foot in. One almost touched his toe, and he withdrew, even as Hank flicked his finger at it. He tried the move several times with similar results. To have a spore touch the skin was not fatal, but the tufts had a venomous coating that inflamed the skin at once. Hiram had said that it was like distilling pure poison-ivy juice and putting the tiniest eye-dropper bubble of the stuff on your skin. Unless flushed off quickly, the tincture had a rotting effect on the skin, like the bite of the recluse spider. To imagine what the spores might do to a naked person was horrible.

"Well, so much for confirming the obvious," Clem said, pulling on the footsheath. "Now, you try it. First with your finger, like I did." Hank flicked at the spores, and they moved away. He jabbed his fist into the cloud and the same thing happened. Then he stuck his entire arm in and held it there. The pattern was unmistakable thus far: the spores were staying a full inch clear of the bodysuit material. Hank was confident, but Clem remained cautious. He stood on one leg, pulled off a footsheath, and held it close to the spores. They did not move away.

"Well, will you look at that," he said, flicking some away with his finger. "The forcefield must be activated in some way by the wearer. It's not the material itself that's protective; it's the interaction of it with the body surface."

"I'll be damned. I believe you are right." Next, Clem held his arm in the cloud for a full minute. He held it still, moved it slowly, then more rapidly; then he made a vigorous windmill motion. In every case, the spores skittered away.

"By God!" Clem declared, "I believe we are going to be impervious to these sticky white devil-spores! I think we are going to be able to kill 'em off—mow 'em down!" Now it was Hank who was the cautious one.

"We haven't entered the cloud yet. It looks too good to be true, but we've got to get in there to really know. If it works—God, man—we can sure as hell kill 'em off, burn 'em, uproot 'em. Do you suppose we could use *fungicide* on them?" The idea of using fungicide on fungi was so redundant that it sounded slapstick, and Hank slapped his thigh, gleefully. He did not feel the expected sting of pain.

"I'm going to stand in there," Clem said, adjusting the rope still lashed to his wrist. "You watch me very damn close." He stepped into the cloud, like walking through a waterfall. He mov-

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ed in several feet and turned to face Hank. The spores moved away, as they had before, and Hank could see the aura formed by the forcefield. All around Clem's body, the spores maintained their uniform distance, while over Clem's head, there was a space approximately the shape and area of a stovepipe hat. Hank thought of the ancient Russian experiments in Kirlian photography.

"Jesus, Clem!" Hank said, calling to Clem through cupped hands. "You've got a halo! You're wearing a damned halo!" Then, he, too, plunged into the cloud, and danced about, a crazy-jubilant clog dance. The spores danced with him, danced away from him, keeping their distance. Both men now had the same new gestalt of an idea: the Capistrano people would move out on to the surface of the desert. They would fashion a new geology, a new earth crust, a fresh epithelial layer of ground. Standing there in the cloud of spores, the undulating tufts like heavy wet snowflakes, Clem looked down at the bleached white earth and imagined it as dark brown and black alluvial soil; soil with grubworms beneath the grass, coiled in fat white fetal curls, with earthworms and locusts and beetles, spiders, grasshoppers, and moles and shrews and crickets, with ivy and dollarweed, poke trees and dandelions. He thought of tropical rain forests, of bamboo shoots and gum trees, pachysandra, and periwinkle. And he realized that it had been years since he had touched a flower.

It was in the luxuriant month of July, 2074, that the Capistrano people began to move out on to the new surface. Hiram had literally towed a bulldozer blade all the way from Santa Barbara and rigged it to a landspeeder with a fusion torch (liberated from a Cal Tech physics lab). He worked doggedly, scraping the desert floor, and when he tired, another man took his place. The people toiled without ceasing, around the clock they worked, scraping, grading, leveling, pushing, plowing, slashing at the blanched earth. The rains came about once a week, and then the Scottsdale people bartered an irrigation service, so that, every day, an aerial tanker sprayed the ground with water and nutrients. Working safely in the nightclouds of spores, the people had uprooted the toadstools and pushed them far back from the canyon rims, where they withered, dried, and died in the purifying fires of the desert sun. The saturation work effort had the effect of stopping the life cycle of the fungi stalks and ribbed fans and virulent spores, so that they were not able to grow to maturity; thus the toadstools were unable to belch forth new clouds. The rotted earth responded, became neutral, dormant, then receptive. The people began to cultivate individual arpents: finger-like plots of earth, fifty feet wide, and as deep as their effort allow-

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ed, the arrangement like that of the line villages of the Louisiana bayou country. The competition in this work was spirited, and the people named their fingers of changing land: Palm Springs, Zoysia Park, Green Acres, Point Verde, Truck Garden, Opal Vineyard, New Pebble Beach, Canterbury Lawn, Emerald Isle. Cleansed of the spore culture, the miracle of photosynthesis began. The earth baked like fresh bread, it dried, filtered, aerated, and sprouted new life. The desert sand, all silica and quartz and slate, was mixed with mulch, sawdust, clay, potting soil (tons of it, liberated from a Newport Beach garden shop wholesaler), red dirt, black dirt, brown dirt—all scavenged and back-hoed and bulldozed and spread, like icing on a cake. It was a huge undertaking, but, in Hiram's words, no harder than building the Babylonian gardens or the lush desert vineyards of agrarian Israel. In the meantime, the people also continued to harvest the truffles, and seedlings of various sorts were bartered from Scottsdale. There were those who saw that the thin layer of earth could not last for long, but no one was discouraged. Each person was assigned to an arpent, and the work was variously communal, ruggedly individualistic, socialistic, and always cooperative.

It came as no surprise that Hiram's arpent was finished before anyone else's, and it looked like a putting green. He had filled it with turf (liberated from a Palm Springs golf course) and then planted a single weeping willow tree right in the center. One bright, irrigated day, he allowed himself the luxury of sitting there for an entire hour, and was a bit like a man-o'-war bird, puffing his throat to attract a nest mate. And, throughout all this time of labor, the bodysuits gave their protection and comfort. In fact, perhaps an even more astounding discovery was that the bodysuits obviated the need for shelter. The need for shelter and protection was what had driven the people down into the canyon, and now they had no need for either. It was something of a culture shock that found as its solution a gradual moving out of the burrows rather than a mass exodus. Many of the people had become accustomed to living like hamsters in wood shavings, snug as a bug in a rug, wearing heavy clothing, covered by blankets, huddled close together for warmth. Now the marvelous new bodysuits protected the wearers from sunburn. frostbite, heat, cold, the dry as well as the wet, the calm as well as the winds of the storm. New plants of all sorts grew, sending down their roots for anchorage, support, and nourishing the stems and leaves and, later, the flowers, the fruits, and the seeds. Nitrogenous residue became ammonified; nitrates formed, were de-nitrified; and the free nitrogen escaped into the air. What an ordinary, and yet what a blessed cycle! The new soil developed its own special

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integrity; there was water and air, bacteria and humus, mulch and rock; and then, one day, Hiram rejoiced in his digging up an earthworm. There was sulfur in the precious new epithelial coating, and potassium, iron, and magnesium. There were root hairs, and root caps, and root regions of elongation. There was turgor and tropism, respiration and photosynthesis, transpiration and fertilization. Above all, there was the metabolism, the irritability, and the autocatalytic states that defined new *life*.

"Looks like we've got a green world again," Clem said to Dora in the lush month of August, as they sat side by side in an ornate gazebo (liberated from the famous rococo house at Eureka).

"Yes, it's lovely," Dora replied, "so lovely, and so small." It was about seven in the evening, and the sky was still alight with the fires of the sun from behind and below and beyond the horizon. In the eastern sky, a large mellow-gold moon lay low and close. The green arpents extended along the rim of the canyon on both sides, and a single arched footbridge spanned the gulf. Some of the people were out on the grassy plots, sitting, relaxing, talking. The ground-level work had not been completed, there were discussions about whether to build structures of some sort, and the area was being used as a kind of solarium while the people continued to move up and out of the canyon. Hiram seemed to have forgotten Dora, spending most of his spare time in the bordello. "These young gals put the juice back in a man," he would say. "Thar's nuthin' better'n fraish young gals." Clem and Dora had applied for a monogamous trial, but it was still pending.

"You know," Clem said, patting his latissimal niche, "I've never had a good reason to use this teleporter, never even thought of a good excuse for using it. Oh, I've tried it out, short-range hops, to make sure it was working, but I've kept it a secret all this time. Nobody but you knows I have it."

"I know a fun way to use it," Dora cooed. "It will transport the two of us, won't it?"

"Yes. In fact, two is the limit."

"Then we can be alone together, anywhere we like."

"That's quite a sweet array of options. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're too busy thinking of monumental things," she said, drawing closer to him. The dusk deepened and the pale yellow glow of the canyon rim-lights appeared. "You think of building things, of fixing and positioning structures, of kingposts and beams and girders and bracings. To have an instant rendezvous machine right under your arm is something you never thought of." Clem stroked his mustache, thoughtfully.

"And now that we have some little time on our hands, thoughts of that sort should filter through to me readi-

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ly, shouldn't they now."

"I would make that a solid prediction, an absolute certainty." She paused and seemed deep in thought for a moment. "I have seen a single white cloud on a bright day. Just one, so thick and plump, deep and rounded, and yet so small and singular, alone in the entire sky. And I have wanted to be beside it, to ride it like a barrel, to teleport to it, maybe even pet it, stroke it like a great white fluffy kitten."

"That's a nice thought. A pretty thought."

"Clem."

"Yes."

"Let's teleport somewhere, right now."

"All right. Where do you want to be?" He extracted the pak and they examined it, like looking at favorite snapshots. The azimuth codes glowed their dim green radium messages in the darkness. A group of people walked past, then swung over the lights and lowered themselves down into the maze of canyon structures. "It has a 50-mile or so range, and an altitude ceiling of 20,000 feet."

"Mercy, could we really go that high?"

"No, dear, we'd freeze—but wait—I forgot about the bodysuits. They'd protect us, I think. Yes, they would. We could go that high."

"And we could actually stay there, suspended?"

"Yes."

"And we could make love."

"Yes. There's a graviton matrix."

"That doesn't sound romantic at all."

"It beats weightlessness, my girl. We'd be up there, and it would feel like sitting on a chaise, but the chaise would be invisible."

"We could make love, in pure space, five miles straight up."

"God, that's a nice, soaring thought."

"Show me how the teleporter works, Clem. Show me how you set the codes." She snuggled closer to him and held one side of the device.

"It's simple. Here's the azimuth settings. You set an angle here, anywhere from zero to ninety, and here's the latitude and longitude grids. You lock in the combination, hug it tight to you, and push the button, the big white one on top. You close your eyes, usually, and—pop—you're where you want to be."

"An instant-rendezvous machine! A place. A place to go. A place to go, to be alone and make love. Do you realize how many lovers have agonized for a *place?*"

"Yes, my dear. Do you want to try a short hop just to get the feel of it?" Dora sat up and brushed at her bodysuit. She had the classic female look of wondering if she was dressed for the occasion. She touched her hair several times. Clem smiled.

"You don't have to primp, my lovely dove," he whispered close in her ear. "Nobody's going to see us." He

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began to press in the codes. "Let's try a thousand feet, straight up. The earth looks interesting from that height. It's not too high up."

"I'd feel much safer sitting in your lap." Clem lifted her, gently, and swung her onto his lap. He completed the simple flight plan and locked it in. He could feel the excitement in Dora's body. Darkness had fallen, but already the moonlight was bright. Most of the people had returned to their burrows. A few children played about, and there were other lovers lying on the grass.

"Won't the others miss us?" Dora asked. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"No and yes," Clem whispered to her. "Now, hold me tight, and we'll be ready."

"I want to kiss you," Dora said, and she closed her mouth over his. She was trembling slightly. Clem drew her to him, as close as he could, held her securely, and pressed the activator button. He felt a soft pop, like the sound of a bubble disappearing, like a gentle thock, deep in the resonant caverns of the inner ear, a dreamlike flicker of consciousness; and then there was the cool air and the featureless space, the warmly twinkling stars, the velvet sky, and the mellow moon. The lovers were suspended in space, 1000 feet above the canyon. They could feel support beneath them, Dora still on Clem's lap, and he could feel the chaise-like support of the graviton matrix as he sat, and beneath his feet. He broke the kiss, but Dora clung close to his neck, her eyes closed.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I don't want to look just yet."

"It's beautiful," Clem said, and Dora looked out over the scene. She stiffened and then relaxed in the graviton matrix. Below, the slash of the canyon appeared, wide and dark, beaded by the dim yellow rim-lights. The desert floor looked pale and white, and the arpents of green could truly be sensed as having depth and texture, like strips of velvet. The sense of aerial perspective was mildly exhilarating at this altitude, and the eye-level horizons still held relatively high, so that the visual sense of terrestrial reference points blended nicely with the sense of height.

"I want to find a lonely white cloud," Dora said, after a while, looking around, tentatively, timidly, "a lovely, lonely, single white cloud, and go to be beside it. Can we do that?"

"Yes, my dear girl. I'll take you there. I'll take you to your cloud." They lay beside each other and embraced. There, in the cool desert air, they clung to each other, elevated in space, transcendent, arisen. And, below, the other cave dwellers were beginning to move up out of the darkness, onto the new green earth.

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James Kelly ("Flight of Fancy," June 1979) returns with a chilling story about four hunters and a strange confrontation in the Maine woods.

The Fear That Men Call Courage

BY

JAMES PATRICK KELLY

His first waking thought was: this is the day. This is the day they said I would die.

Roland Dekker lay in the cool darkness of his bedroom and tried to piece together his self-control for one last time. He thought about staying in bed and waiting for them. He thought about going out to face them. He thought about ignoring them. He had considered these things many times before.

Dekker eased out of bed without disturbing his wife and raised the shade. Raindrops clung to the windows and the sky was the color of wood smoke. In front of each house on the block battered garbage cans were lined up waiting to be emptied. The rhythms of life continued as usual for the rest of the world; only he was out of step. He lowered the shade and began to get dressed.

His nerve almost failed when he came back into the bedroom to kiss Ellen good-by. She was curled into sleep like a cat; her left arm stretched toward his side of the bed. Eventually she would reach for his warmth, miss it and wake up. His eyes burned as he bent over and touched his lips to her palm.

He caught the 8:20 streetcar from Riverside and settled into a window seat for the ride into Boston. The car slowly filled with slack-faced commuters before descending into the sepulchral downtown tunnels. The faces receded into the gloom, leaving Dekker alone with memories he had hoped to escape. Wojek, Bolt and Jackson; today was the anniversary of their deaths.

The pond had no name. The dry autumn had driven its shores back,

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leaving wide flats of mud which thawed briefly in late afternoon. At its outlet the pond quickened into an icy, rock-strewn stream; the rest was still.

The four of them had planned to go hunting in Maine for years, but this was the first season that all could agree on a weekend. They had had no luck on the morning drive, but right after lunch Dekker had spooked a fawn from its thicket right at Wojek's stand. Since it was Wojek's first hunt, Dekker helped him bleed and dress the animal.

That night they wrapped the heart in foil, roasted it on the coals and mixed it with freeze-dried stew. It was delicious. They toasted themselves with Scotch and pond water and vowed to hunt together every year.

It began in the half-light of dawn on Sunday morning, the seventh. A cold mist swallowed the forest. There was a terrible silence, like the hush of a heavy snowfall. Dekker was jarred from sleep by a shooting pain. His legs cramped and he sat up to knead the aching calf muscles. The stiffness spread and he twisted to the ground in agony.

He first saw them on the opposite shore and forced the pain from his mind. They swept like a squall across the water, shadows darkening into human shape. Robes cut from the fabric of night hung from their deadwood faces.

Dekker's will grew stronger once he reached the office. He had designed these rooms to suit his own taste; they were filled with comfortable things and familiar people. He went right to work as if it were an ordinary day. Just before coffee break the editor of *American Architecture* called. Jack Murray was an old friend; he told Dekker that he wanted to publish Dekker's Webster Community College in his "Best Interiors of the Year" issue. Dekker tried to sound pleased; he even offered to give Murray's photographer a guided tour of the building. He congratulated himself dryly for his touch. When Murray suggested the following Thursday for the session, Dekker shuffled the pages of his appointments calendar to see if he had anything scheduled. He confirmed the date, then flipped the pages of the calendar back to the one which read, "Today is November 7, 1979."

He went to an early lunch with his partner, Kerins. They talked about their strategy for the meeting with the Wellington people. Kerins's design team was ready to present schematic drawings for the new Lowell dorm. As soon as Kerins finished briefing him, Dekker knew there was nothing to worry about. Kerins was a good man; he would run the office well once the shock of Dekker's death had passed. It pleased Dekker to think that five or ten years from now some draftsman would still be turning out drawings with "Dekker, Kerins & Associates, Interior Designers" stamped at the bottom.

He had three Manhattans for

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lunch, ignoring Kerins's embarrassed silences until the liquor and his suppressed tension defeated him. He excused himself and rushed to the men's room where he threw up, heaving long after his stomach had emptied.

Dekker watched the three sweep across the pond and up to the tent. One stooped to examine the fawn's carcass, which was splayed over a log, then nodded to its companions. They entered the tent. Dekker's .30/30 was well within reach, but he was paralyzed; he could not even turn his head to see what his friends were doing.

Jackson whimpered as they took him out. He stumbled through the fly, one of them on each arm. Wojek was next, then Bolt. Dekker was last. He shivered when they touched him with their fish-slime hands. They pulled him erect and stood him in line with the others.

He started to distinguish the three shadow people. The one near the fawn had a man's sunken face, skin sprayed onto a skull. The other two seemed vaguely feminine. One had a wrinkled, cheap-leather face; the other's was smooth and expressionless, like the death mask of a child.

The shadow man laid the gutted carcass in front of Dekker and his friends. It collapsed upon itself, exhaling a gamy odor.

The wrinkled one produced a carved wooden chalice from beneath her robes. She glided over to Jackson. The little dead girl reached up to his eyes and drew the lids closed with her middle fingers.

"Cry," she said. Jackson opened his eyes, and tears streamed down his face and into the chalice. He was still crying when they moved to Wojek.

She pulled his right arm toward her and ran her middle finger across his palm.

"Bleed," she said as she thrust his bleeding hand into the chalice.

The little dead girl pulled Bolt's shorts down to his knees and put her hand on his abdomen.

"Piss." The wrinkled one collected his flow.

They turned to the shadow man who picked up the carcass by the snout so that its lower jaw hung open. The little dead girl poured the mixture from the chalice into its maw. The carcass made a mewling noise and its hindquarters kicked convulsively.

Each of the three shadows spat into the chalice. then the two women approached Dekker. They pulled down his shorts and the little dead girl took him in her hands. Her grip burned.

"Come."

Dekker went hard immediately. Nausea roiled from his stomach. It was hard to breathe — he was choking. He screamed in pain as he ejaculated into the chalice.

The little dead girl dripped its contents into the fawn. The carcass's eyes opened; they were motionless, unseeing. The shadow man set it on the

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ground and stroked its matted coat. The fawn stood on shaky legs and licked his hand with its shriveled tongue.

Dekker was sitting on the toilet, gasping. The memory had possessed him effortlessly — as if he had sought it. He loosened his tie and put his head between his legs. He felt chilled.

He rested for a few minutes and then tried to pull himself together. He washed the acid taste from his mouth in the sink, combed his hair and splashed water on his face. When he finished he wobbled downstairs to the bar and ordered a double Cutty Sark. He gulped it and set the empty glass down hard on the bar. A Chamber of Commerce type standing next to him glared, then shook his head in disgust.

Dekker collected a worried Kerins and hailed a cab for the office.

The people from Wellington College came at one. Dekker said little during the presentation. The dorm seemed the least important thing in the world; he thought everybody at the meeting was too damn serious. When the client's head man, congratulated them on the design, Dekker laughed. His voice had a curious, high-pitched quality to it, as if something were stuck in his throat. At first he did not realize how bad it sounded. Then Kerins was behind him, squeezing Dekker's shoulder. Everyone else in the room was staring either at them or the floor. Kerins asked that they be excused.

They found an empty office near the conference room, and Kerins called the mailroom for an office boy to take Dekker home. He glowered at his partner as he hung up, started to say something, then shut his mouth and stalked back to his meeting. It was better this way, Dekker told himself. He had been a fool to think that he could brazen out the day at the office.

Benny, the office boy, appeared shortly and they went out to the parking garage to get the company van. Dekker spent the ride to Newton in dread of finding Ellen at home.

He called for her as he opened the side door; there was no reply. He bounded upstairs to the bedroom, stripped off his work clothes and put on jeans, hiking boots, a flannel shirt and his down vest. Crossing the hall to his study, he rummaged through the desk until he found a dusty box of twelve-gauge shells. The Winchester was on the top shelf of his bedroom closet, underneath the extra blankets. He wrapped the shotgun and ammunition in a blanket and put them in the trunk of his Volvo.

He scrambled downstairs to the kitchen and scrawled all the things he had wanted to say to Ellen that morning on her message board. On his way out for the last time he stopped at the liquor cabinet. If he hurried he could still get to the pond before dark.

The little dead girl picked up the struggling fawn and cradled it to her

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chest. The wrinkled one approached the four men.

"The shadow of death is on you. Remember the day."

As she rejoined her companions they began to waver in the dappled light.

"Remember." The light pierced them and they were gone.

The sounds of the forest closed in around the stunned men. Jackson dropped to his knees, shuddering convulsively. The others ignored him.

"What the hell...who were they?" Bolt's voice quivered near panic.

"I don't know. How should I know?" Wojek said angrily. "What was she saying?"

"Not sure. Didn't make sense."

"I understood," said Dekker. "We all did." Bolt and Wojek stared at him. Then Bolt looked away; his sagging face turned the color of eggshell.

"It's obvious," he said, almost to himself. "Some kind of hallucination. Food poisoning, maybe."

"What about this?" said Wojek, his gaze still locked on Dekker. He held up his hand. A five-inch slash ran across the blood-smeared palm.

"Here, let me see that," Bolt said, grasping Wojek by the wrist. Wojek submitted patiently to his examination. "How'd you get it?" Bolt relaxed his grip but Wojek did not lower the arm. "You cut yourself." There was accusation in Bolt's voice. Wojek's hand remained motionless. "Get that thing away from me, damn it!"

"I've got to walk." Dekker stopped by the tent to pick up and load his rifle. "Be back in a few minutes."

He wandered around the shore of the pond, coming eventually to the spot where he had first seen the shadows. He searched the mud flats for some trace of them. There was none. Dekker was not as afraid of seeing the creatures again as he was of finding his own fear, his cowardice. He had lived his life to that day with an image of himself that now lay shattered near the tent on the other side of the pond. He thought he might be able to piece it together again if he sought out its destroyers as if he were not afraid.

When he returned to the campsite he found Jackson and Bolt sitting on their packs, sharing a hip flask. Jackson greeted him with a thumbs-up sign and an embarrassed smile. His eyes were shiny. Wojek knelt at the opposite side of the clearing, clumsily rolling up his sleeping bag. His hand had been bandaged. Dekker offered to help but was refused.

It was an hour's hike back to the logging road where Jackson's station wagon was parked. At first they trudged through the forest together, nursing the dwindling supply of Scotch. Then Bolt began to argue with Wojek again about his cut.

"Forget my hand then. Just forget it. What about the fawn? You saying it wasn't really dead?"

"Wolves could've carried it off. A bobcat."

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"There are no wolves in Maine."

"Wild dogs then. Besides, what you're saying makes no sense. There's no good explanation for what those things did or why they chose us."

Wojek shrugged. "God doesn't explain, so why should the devil?"

"The devil? Are you listening to this, Dekker? He's trying to tell us it was the devil."

Dekker and Jackson dropped steadily behind until the forest drowned their bickering. As they walked, Jackson tried to describe what had happened to him. When the shadows made him cry, he said he felt as if every tragedy he had ever heard of had become a personal sorrow. He talked about his father's death and starving children and plane crashes as if he, somehow, were at fault. He rambled on about Korea, spoke intimately of failure. The more he talked, the less coherent he became. His words slurred together as if his self-pity were intoxicating. Dekker tried to rally him, but when Jackson was not himself speaking, he seemed to withdraw into his sadness. Eventually both fell silent.

When they reached the car, Jackson decided that he did not want to drive. So Bolt, his next-door neighbor, got behind the wheel.

Dekker never could remember the name of the road. Like many of Maine's backcountry lanes, it was narrow and twisting. Some of the larger potholes had been patched. There was no posted speed limit, but fifty seemed reasonable enough for men in a hurry on a deserted road.

The accident was not really Bolt's fault. He slowed as he went through a sharp curve, and there was the buck, a big whitetail with at least a ten-point rack, standing in the middle of the road. It froze. Bolt swerved to miss it and stamped on the brakes. His right front wheel dropped off the pavement into a pothole on the shoulder. The car skidded off the road and smashed head-on into a pine tree. Luckily, Bolt was wearing his seat belt. Wojek, sitting next to him, did not believe in seat belts.

He went through the windshield headfirst and stuck there, half in, half out. After the impact there was a moment of complete stillness, as if the rest of the world had to catch up to them. Dekker watched dazedly as dark blood beaded on the finely waxed hood of Jackson's station wagon.

Wojek's death was a wedge that drove the others apart. Right after Thanksgiving they stopped taking the streetcar into Boston together. Jackson got into a carpool with two other people from his ad agency; Bolt was transferred from his bank's downtown office to a suburban branch. Aside from the exchange of Christmas cards, they had no communication for nearly a year.

One Friday after work, just as the Dekkers were about to leave for a

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weekend of foliage viewing, Jackson came by. He was frightened and had lost all skill at hiding it. That morning he had seen Bolt collapse while taking out the garbage. Since Bolt was divorced and lived alone, Jackson had taken him into his house and called for an ambulance. The people at the hospital were not saying what was wrong, but the man looked like death. And when Jackson had called the bank, he was told that Bolt had resigned a few days earlier.

The news chilled Dekker. He told Ellen that he wanted to postpone their trip for a day; she was understanding.

Bolt was resting uncomfortably in a private room when Dekker and Jackson visited. Skin hung loosely over his shrunken flesh. There was a jaundiced tinge to it, like the page of an old book. Little spider-shaped marks were scattered across his face and hands. His eyes had sunken behind two dark pouches. Bolt was completely lucid, knew why they had come, and did not care.

They spent a few awkward minutes talking about the Patriots and hunting, then left. Dekker promised that he would stop by again but never did. Seventeen days later, Albert Bolt went into a coma induced by alcoholic cirrhosis. Diuretics were administered to no avail. He died of massive liver failure in the early hours of Monday morning, November 7, 1977.

Bolt's death broke Harry Jackson. Three months after the funeral, he was given an indefinite leave of absence from the ad agency. A few weeks later, he was admitted to Logan Hospital on the recommendation of his psychiatrist. The doctors there diagnosed his problem as a mild depression. It was quite understandable, they said, considering his age (44), his past history of analysis and the sudden and tragic deaths of two close friends. They put him on a regimen of antidepressant drugs and cautiously predicted that he would be out in a few months.

Dekker visited him only once; their meeting was stormy and brief. Jackson wanted to tell his doctor about the shadows and asked Dekker to corroborate the story. When Dekker tried to talk him out of it, Jackson accused him of being in league with the devil. There was a look in his eye as cold and distant as the stars in winter. He screamed his hatred for Dekker, and the orderlies came quickly to hustle him away

Jackson was released briefly that summer; he went berserk. He tried to hang himself using a clothesline tied to an overhead light. The fixture pulled loose from the ceiling. He spent several weeks after that in a strait jacket, weeping until the tears would come no more. He complained of hallucinations and was heavily sedated. Toward the end of October he went blind, suddenly, inexplicably. The staff was convinced it was a delusion, but Jackson's doctor ordered a complete physical to be sure.

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At lunchtime on November 7, the day nurse found Harry Jackson lying on the floor of his room, twisted in the sheets, dead. The lab report from his examination, which arrived that afternoon, indicated a strong potential for a dissecting aneurysm and warned, too late, of the possibility of a stroke.

Dekker pulled off the logging road and parked near a crude wooden bridge. He checked his rearview mirror nervously; the only movement in it was his own dust settling back to the dry road. He opened the door and got out. Not quite half a bottle of Cutty Sark smoldered in his stomach.

He took the Winchester and the shells from the trunk and tried to load the gun. His hand was unsteady and he lost two shells in the leaves. When he finished he shambled down the road, searching for the trail to the pond.

There was a rustle in the woods to his right. He slowed to listen. There it was again. He thought briefly of hiding the shotgun, since he did not want to be hassled for hunting without a license. He did not react quickly enough, though, because as he peered into the woods a dark form took shape.

It was one of the shadow women: the wrinkled one.

Once he spotted her, she stayed her distance, circling out onto the road about thirty yards ahead of him. She was smaller than he remembered, only a little over five feet, and not quite so ugly. She might have been a wizened backcountry grandam, if it had not been for her black robes. They were so dark that from a distance he could see them only in two dimensions, like some surreal inkblot on his field of vision. They tortured light, cast shadows in impossible directions.

Dekker brought gun to shoulder instinctively, sighted the shadow down the barrel, squeezed the trigger with a practiced smoothness. The report thundered maddeningly inside his head, and he lost contact with her for a second. When he saw her again she appeared unharmed. He fired again.

Nothing. He knew that he had not missed.

He snarled and Roland Dekker, the man, was overpowered by the enraged and terrified animal that had struggled for release all day. Wielding the shotgun by the barrel, he charged the shadow. She waited, unmoving. With all the berserk strength that surged through him, he brought the heavy stock around at her head like a desperate batter swinging for the wall. At the point of impact, instead of the crunch of wood crushing bone, there was a slow yielding as if he were flailing at her underwater. The side of her head shimmered as the gunstock passed through, and then the gun flew from his grip and skidded down the road. Pain seared his hands, coursed through his arms and exploded in his chest. He staggered and flopped to the ground.

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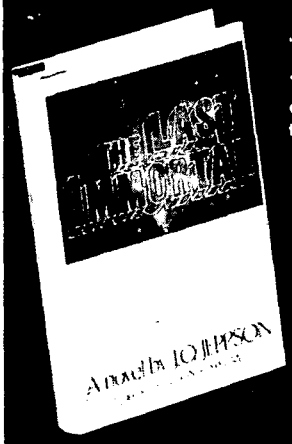

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He lay on his back in the dust, panting. Each breath was like swallowing fire. He saw nothing but a blur flecked with blue-white glitter. He sensed the shadow's approach and tried to focus, but the sun, which hung just over the treetops, blinded him when he looked up. She said something which was garbled by the roaring in his ears.

"Stand," she repeated as she took his hands in hers. Where she touched him, pain ceased. There was no feeling but the dead chill of her grasp.

"Why...?" He felt as if his voice were fused to his throat; when he spoke it tore him apart inside. "Why did you do...to us?"

"You did it to yourselves." She pulled effortlessly and he sat up. When she pulled again he resisted. His shoulder dislocated. He tried to scream but could not. She let go one of his hands and caressed his shoulder. It went numb.

Part of him, the animal part, was ready to submit and escape the broken, tortured body. He gazed up at her for help and his vision cleared. The sun was over her right shoulder now and one edge seemed to touch her face. The light revealed the timeless passion on her ruined features, the craving to enfold all life in her embrace. Dekker saw her face and recognized his death.

He spat at it.

Her face dissolved in flame; her face and the sun were two pools of

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burning gold. She dropped his other hand and he fell back into the dust.

"Live then, until I return." She passed directly over him, and the hem of her robe brushed his forehead.

Dekker awoke slowly, in starlight, his awareness blunted by the steady throb in his shoulder. There was a rumbling in the distance which did not immediately register on his fragile consciousness, but as it grew, a hollow feeling of terror also grew within him. He twisted his head toward it. Two pools of golden light were bearing down on him. His first thought was of the shadow's return. But as the lights drew closer, the rumble gained a crackling edge: the sound of wheels crunching gravel.

He propped himself up on his good arm and pushed feebly toward the side of the road and safety. Pain made the lights spin crazily. They kept coming, closer, close enough to see the dull sheen of chrome between them. Dekker kicked out with one last, frantic heave, and then the lights were on him.

There was silence. He hurt, but no longer cared. Hands grasped at him. White faces loomed. Then the stars went out and the darkness converged with the silence.

He lingered in the darkness. He heard a voice crying, pleading, "Stop!" and recognized it as his own. He longed for the shadow's embrace.

He slept.

Someone had taped gauze to his forehead. He imagined that he could feel each fiber. His mouth was dry. Something tugged at his legs. He tried to kick out, found that he could not, and fainted.

After a time Dekker parted the darkness. He was in an unlighted hospital room. He lay in bed, not thinking about his legs, which he could not feel. He thought of the time, of midnight and the final approach of the shadow.

Finally a nurse came into the room and turned on the lights. He tried to ask her the time but found that he could not even manage a whisper. He glanced down at his wrist, back at her. She smiled at him, not understanding. He repeated the gesture.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Dekker," she said cheerfully as she crossed the room to the window. "Yes, you are. Lucky to be alive."

She pulled the sash on the blinds and sunlight spilled into the room.

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"I'm sorry, I have a very rich fantasy life!"

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Books

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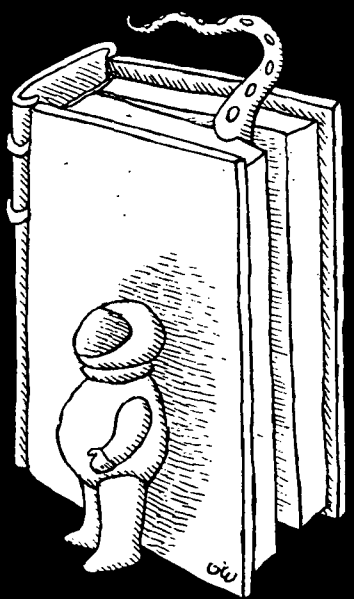

In Memory Yet Green, Doubleday & Company, Inc., $15.95

In Joy Still Felt, Doubleday & Company Inc., $19.95

The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov

What would you like to know?

The Good Doctor is fluent, possessed of meticulous records and journals going back to the days of childhood, impressively organized in his thinking, and apparently tireless. This and more is all apparent at the surface of his massive two-volume autobiography, which we hope will someday be at least three. Nor is he a stranger to any F&SF reader. Nor, in fact, is it possible to believe that anyone with the slightest interest in SF, in science, or for that matter any portion of the universe of intellection, doesn't already have some depth of friendship with him.

That, I think, is the outstanding one of all of Asimov's qualities as a writer. He is the reader's friend. His concern for your clear understanding of his message, his fondness for you and his trust in your ability to make good use of his message — that gestalt of qualities rises warmly from every paragraph he writes, whatever the mode or the subject.

He is at times bumptious. At times, he does something in his autobiography that he has rarely done elsewhere — he goes on too long after a particular point has been fully made. He displays one or two other less than

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impeccable aspects of behavior. But he is your friend, and he is paying you the highest compliment of all.

No fool at all, he knows—he knew from the beginning of the project—that no man can be the perfect hero of his honest autobiography, and he trusts you to understand that. You want to know about him, or you wouldn't have opened the book. All right—a wordsmith of his skills could readily have devoted his effort to some dazzling footwork. He could have sailed off on glittering flights of generality and statesmanly pontification, as many do. Or he could have danced an intellectual fan dance with you, replete with enigmatic references to dark nights of the soul, quasi-confidences about famous names whose privacy he could (Ho! Ho!) compromise, delicious scandals he would retail if he weren't so discreet, might retail at some future time.... You know how that goes; you've seen the technique often enough. It's a species of orchestrated performance.

Asimov doesn't do that. He tells you about the events in his life, his responses to them, day after day, plateau after plateau of development, and it's all there. Make of it what you will; there he stands, your friend, paradoxically in the limelight yet, in all this wordage, never "on stage." This from a man famous for his public manner, his role as toastmaster and raconteur, his timing as sharp as any professional jester's. He could have done us a tour de force novel about his life, and few of us would have been the wiser. Instead, he hands us his diary.

Oh, some of the pages are glued together lightly. Again paradoxically, although he uses hundreds of thousands of words, some of them devoted to confidences, he eschews gossip. He has apparently made a meticulous effort never to say anything for the sake of poking fun, to make a "harmless" joke at the expense of an uninvolved party, to titillate us with the sort of anecdote that's the stuff of life for the late-night party.

It's not party time in these books. We sit in the afternoon sunlight coming through the windows of a conservatively furnished parlor; we sip tea, and our host responds to our query. Therefore, since life itself sometimes pokes fun, sometimes juxtaposes us with circumstances that are inherently salacious in some sense, there are things our friend does not detail. Given the choice between not telling us the whole of the truth or including even the appearance of deliberate gossipmongering, he gives us a sufficient outline of the truth and goes on to the next thing in detail.

All right; who is our friend?

Our friend was born in 1920, in the Ukraine, the son of villagers, and came with them to Brooklyn in infancy. He was a loyal, hard-working child in his parents' candy stores, a brilliant student, attracted to the life sciences, took his degrees at topflight institutions, be-

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came a professor. Working in the stores, he became a reader of science fiction and was attracted to the idea of becoming an SF writer. By trial and error and industry, he succeeded. As a professor and as a writer, he collaborated on a textbook and wrote some science articles. In due course, the science writing became so attractive that it now occupies a major portion of his time. It became so successful, and his personality and interests were such, that the remainder of his time is now almost fully occupied with writing on a multiplicity of topics outside science, and in lecturing. He is the world's foremost popular authority.

But you already knew all that. Not in detail, but that can be rectified simply by reading these two volumes. There is a guaranteed happy ending(?). There are scores of included photographs—young Isaac, older Isaac, alone and in various companies; friends, relatives, professional acquaintances famous and otherwise. People, places, things. Most of the names familiar to SF readers troop by. Asimov's long relationship with John W. Campbell, Jr., and his friendships with many of Campbell's writers for *Astounding*, are discussed in considerable detail. His career in relationship to *F&SF* is fully recounted. Is this worth a total of $35.90, plus tax, to you? Should you wait for the paperbacks? How can I hope to tell you how urgent your curiosity is?

Let me tell you what I wanted to know. I wanted to know what goes on inside a genius. What I got, of course, is what a genius is willing to say about what he thinks is going on inside himself. This is all anyone can ever get from such a source. But because Asimov has chosen this diarist's approach, standing back and letting us form our own judgments from the proferred data, he has made his essential self fruitlessly accessible in the sense that he rebuts hardly any synthesis one might arrive at. There he is, make of him what you will, and the acuity of whatever you make must depend entirely on its own internal logic. You're dealing with a man who has deliberately drawn no conclusions of his own. So yours have nothing to push against, and had better be self-supporting.

Slippery friend. Have some more tea, ask some more questions. All the answers are here. And all the answers have equal weight.

His technical accomplishment in the construction of these books is awesome to me, and few things are truly awesome. It's hellishly difficult to write an autobiography when you know without a doubt it will be published. The traumas rise to the surface, the compulsion to dramatize becomes overwhelming, the passion to explore every nuance of one's life creates a process of change within the autobiographer. Throughout the manuscript, earlier passages which seemed complete and correctly directed suddenly, in hindsight, are out

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of focus and require recasting in the light of each latest self-discovery. Creeping in comes an awareness that you may never get it finished.

I don't know how much of that Isaac went through after he began actually writing it down. Despite having read the published version, I still know nothing about his creative methods or about his actual writing procedures.

He tells us about sitting down at the typewriter and working hard; about looking things up in reference books; about editorial conferences in which projects are shaped. But he tells us almost nothing about what goes on during the long walks and the midnight ruminations to which most writers are prone and which, for most writers, are when the actual writing gets done. Perhaps he doesn't work that way. Perhaps the brain makes all the creative decisions at exactly the pace of the hands punching the keys. The man sits down, begins to type, continues to type, and when the manuscript is complete, lo, it has effective form and purpose which the mind, through some automatic mechanism of synthesis, imposed on the forebrain which was selecting the particular words and paragraphs. A mind which has produced over 200 books certainly ought to be able to do that.

But what a mind in any case, because look at the result: A structure which is the only structure a multiplex person like Asimov could have used without getting lost in himself, and the only structure which can be friendly and yet preserve our friend's essential core of privacy.

Did he do it that way consciously? Of course he did! A mind of this caliber, doing the thing for which it is particularly trained, does not kid itself. A mind may avoid or distort responses to conscious self-examination—slippery mind—but some totally rectitudinous portion of it delivers an objective running report on what is going on, and I'm sure that Isaac is in excellent contact with all facets of his personality.

Turn a few pages farther in this magazine and read his column. Chatty, informative, witty, useful; you are getting what you came for. The professional writer has delivered what was wanted. He has gone out and examined some external aspect of the universe, and brought back a description of it which we can all handily take away with us. Point to anything—anything at all, in or under the starry sky—express interest, and he will satisfy that interest. Or he will, alternatively, come to you and say "I noticed this aspect of reality, and I thought you might like to hear about it. Now, look where I'm pointing...you see that?...let me tell you what that is."

Not this time. Not this one time, of all the times he has written for us, our friend. There is nothing we can point to, in the infinite reaches of the human mind, that does not first have to be located for us by utterances from the

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person possessed of that mind. It has no objective reality; all the evidence for its existence is circumstantial. Similarly, he can tell us he is pointing to it, but there is no way we can confirm that. Again, similarly, the very nature of the mind is such that not even the person most intimately connected with it can be objectively sure that what he sees in it now is the way it was.

How much easier, how much more comfortable, how much more satisfactory it would have been for us if someone who was not Isaac Asimov, but in all other respects exactly like Isaac Asimov, had been given the assignment of writing these volumes on Isaac Asimov! But then, of course, we would have been nagged by the thought that this was, after all, only a biography; we would have wanted to hear the same events, or almost certainly more accurate descriptions of those same events, recounted by Asimov himself.

The paradoxes are inescapable, and spiralling, because Asimov could not have helped but know from the very beginning that though there was tremendous interest in having a life of Asimov, once we had it there could only be heightened interest in *really* having a life of Asimov, no matter how real he made it.

And he did it anyway.

What would you like to know? Would you like to know how it sounds?

It sounds like an earnest, meticulous, ultramethodical person bumping through life, coping with persons who sometimes don't see things the way he does, some of them in authority over him, some of them granted genuine authoritativeness by his own appraisal of their qualifications *vis a vis* his, some of them granted nothing of the sort but nevertheless in power over his actions. It sounds like a person directing all his intelligence and energy toward forging places for himself in a sometimes circumstantially obstinate universe. It sounds like a man attaining conditions which ought by all prior logic be happy conditions, but reveal themselves not to be. Or, conversely, benefiting from unpredictable fortune.

It sounds, in other words, like a human being's story. But this is not any other human being. This is a public figure whose stature is founded on public intellection.

We read a life of Stonewall Jackson, Willie Mays or Richard E. Byrd, Tallulah Bankhead or Richard Nixon, and what we expect to find are evidences of how the hero prepared for the battle and how he felt on winning it, how it affected his subsequent life—how the central deed was done, and what it meant.

We read a life of Einstein, and the expectation is much the same. But we don't read a life of Asimov to find out how to write 200 books. The chances of any of us writing 200 books are worse than our chances of landing on

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the Moon. Nor is writing 300 or 400 books the objective of Asimov's life. The objective of Asimov's life is to think. And, as it happens, to communicate. But there is no one particular thing he thinks about, or even one particular area. He is not a philosopher, not primarily a scientist in the common understanding of that term, not except incidentally a titled expert, not any of the classifiable things.

He is, when you come down to it, a child in a room full of unlabelled objects and unexplained events; a room so huge that the walls, the ceiling, and even the floor are immensely far away and lose their features in shadow. He is like us. But he has more energy. Those who preceded us in the room sent out search parties, explorers and librarians who, channeling their energies as they must, proceeded along defined paths and send back messages only about what those paths intersected. The messages come back at us from all sides, linear, narrow, each claiming priority. We don't know what to make of it.

Isaac tells us. Bounding happily from one thing to another, his caracolings intersecting path after path, he puts things together for us. Others tell us what is on the paths. Isaac tells us what is in the room.

And of course that is what we all desperately want to know. So Isaac is valuable to us, rightly held in great esteem, and fully entitled to the rewards we ungrudgingly give him.

But from a life of Asimov we want to know how to be someone who tells us what we want to know.

Suddenly, Isaac is an enormous room. The messages come in: Here is the event of January 2, 1920. It may have been as early as October 4, 1919, depending on the calendar used. I was born. Here is the event of Valentine's Day, 1942: I met Gertrude Blugerman. Here is the event of June 16, 1954: I got my first speeding ticket. On September 7, 1961, I ate my most gluttonous meal. On May 30, 1974, I left for a trip to Europe aboard the liner *France*....

Linear. All linear, like the accustomed universe. The Asimov universe speaks to us in the mode of a universe. And in it there is not, there cannot be, an Asimov to tell us what is in there.

What would you like to know? You must go and find out for yourself.

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Jane Yolen's new story is something different from her — a fantasy about an American classical actor who makes a remarkable discovery in a thick grove far up on a mountain in Greece.

The Sleep of Trees

BY

JANE YOLEN

"Never invoke the gods unless you really want them to appear. It annoys them very much."

—Chesterton

It had been a long winter. Arrhiza had counted every line and blister on the inside of the bark. Even the terrible binding power of the heartwood rings could not contain her longings. She desperately wanted spring to come so she could dance free, once again, of her tree. At night she looked up and through the spiky winter branches counted the shadows of early birds crossing the moon. She listened to the mewling of buds making their slow, painful passage to the light. She felt the sap veins pulse sluggishly around her. All the signs were there, spring was coming, spring was near, yet still there was no spring.

She knew that one morning, without warning, the rings would loosen and she would burst through the bark into her glade. It had happened every year of her life. But the painful wait, as winter slouched towards its dismal close, was becoming harder and harder to bear.

When Arrhiza had been younger, she had always slept the peaceful, uncaring sleep of trees. She would tumble, half-awake, through the bark and onto the soft, fuzzy green earth with the other young dryads, their arms and legs tangling in that first sleepy release. She had wondered then that the older trees released their burdens with such stately grace, the dryads and the meliade sending slow green praises into the air before the real Dance began. But she wondered no longer. Younglings simply slept the whole winter

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dreaming of what they knew best: roots and bark and the untroubling dark. But aging conferred knowledge, dreams change. Arrhiza now slept little and her waking, as her sleep, was filled with sky.

She even found herself dreaming of birds. Knowing trees were the honored daughters of the All Mother, allowed to root themselves deep into her flesh, knowing trees were the treasured sisters of the Huntress, allowed to unburden themselves into her sacred groves, Arrhiza envied birds. She wondered what it would be like to live apart from the land, to travel at will beyond the confines of the glade. Silly creatures though birds were, going from egg to earth without a thought, singing the same messages to one another throughout their short lives, Arrhiza longed to fly with one, passengered within its breast. A bird lived but a moment, but what a moment that must be.

Suddenly realizing her heresy, Arrhiza closed down her mind lest she share thoughts with her tree. She concentrated on the blessings to the All Mother and Huntress, turning her mind from sky to soil, from flight to the solidity of roots.

And in the middle of her prayer, Arrhiza fell out into spring, as surprised as if she were still young. She tumbled against one of the birch, her nearest neighbor, Phyla of the white face. Their legs touched, their hands brushing one another's thighs.

Arrhiza turned toward Phyla. "Spring comes late," she sighed, her breath caressing Phyla's budlike ear.

Phyla rolled away from her, pouting. "You make Spring Greeting sound like a complaint. It is the same every year." She sat up with her back to Arrhiza and stretched her arms. Her hands were outlined against the evening sky, the second and third fingers slotted together like a leaf. Then she turned slowly towards Arrhiza, her woodsgreen eyes unfocused. In the soft, filtered light her body gleamed whitely and the darker patches were mottled beauty marks on her breasts and sides. She was up to her feet in a single fluid movement and into the Dance.

Arrhiza watched, still full length on the ground, as one after another the dryads and meliades rose and stepped into position, circling, touching, embracing, moving apart. The cleft of their legs flashed pale signals around the glade.

Rooted to their trees, the hamadryads could only lean out into the Dance. They swayed to the lascivious pipings of spring. Their silver-green hair, thick as vines, eddied around their bodies like water.

Arrhiza watched it all but still did not move. How long she had waited for this moment, the whole of the deep winter, and yet she did not move. What she wanted was more than this, this entering into the Dance on command. She wanted to touch, to walk,

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to run, even to dance when she alone desired it. But then her blood was singing, her body pulsating; her limbs stretched upward answering the call. She was drawn towards the others and, even without willing it, Arrhiza was into the Dance.

Silver and green, green and gold, the grove was a smear of color and wind as she whirled around and around with her sisters. Who was touched and who the toucher; whose arm, whose thigh was pressed in the Dance, it did not matter. The Dance was all. Drops of perspiration, sticky as sap, bedewed their backs and ran slow rivulets to the ground. The Dance *was* the glade, *was* the grove. There was no stopping, no starting, for a circle has no beginning or end.

Then suddenly a hunter's horn knifed across the meadow. It was both discordant and sweet, sharp and caressing at once. The Dance did not stop but it dissolved. The Huntress was coming, the Huntress was here.

And then She was in the middle of them all, straddling a moon-beam, the red hem of Her saffron hunting tunic pulled up to expose muscled thighs. Seven hounds lay growling at Her feet. She reached up to Her hair and in one swift, savage movement, pulled at the golden cords that bound it up. Her hair cascaded like silver and gold leaves onto Her shoulders and crept in tendrils across Her small, perfect breasts. Her heart-shaped face, with its crescent smile, was both innocent and corrupt; Her eyes as dark blue as a storm-coming sky. She dismounted the moon shaft and turned around slowly, as if displaying Herself to them all, but She was the Huntress, and She was doing the hunting. She looked into their faces one at a time, and the younger ones looked back, both eager and afraid.

Arrhiza was neither eager nor afraid. Twice already she had been the chosen one, torn laughing and screaming from the glade, brought for a night to the moon's dark side. The pattern of the Huntress' mouth was burned into her throat's hollow, Her mark, just as Her words were still in Arrhiza's ears. "You are mine. Forever. If you leave me, I will kill you, so fierce is my love." It had been spoken each time with a kind of passion, in between kisses, but the words, like the kisses, were as cold and distant and pitiless as the moon.

The Huntress walked around the circle once again, pausing longest before a young meliade, Pyrena of the appleblossoms. Under that gaze Pyrena seemed both to wither and to bloom. But the Huntress shook Her head and Her mouth formed the slightest moue of disdain. Her tongue flicked out and was caught momentarily between flawless teeth. Then She clicked to the hounds who sprang up. Mounting the moonbeam again, She squeezed it with Her thighs and was gone, riding to another grove.

The moment She disappeared, the glade was filled with breathy gossip.

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"Did you see..." began Dryope. Trembling with projected pleasure, she turned to Pyrena. "The Huntress looked at you. Truly looked. Next time it *will* be you. I *know* it will."

Pyrena wound her fingers through her hair, letting fall a cascade of blossoms that perfumed the air. She shrugged but smiled a secret, satisfied smile.

Arrhiza turned abruptly and left the circle. She went back to her tree. Sluggishly the softened heartwood rings admitted her and she leaned into them, closed her eyes, and tried to sleep though she knew that in spring no true sleep would come.

She half-dreamed of clouds and birds, forcing them into her mind, but really she was hearing a buzzing. Sky, she murmured to herself, remember sky.

"Oh trees, fair and flourishing,
on the high hills They stand,
lofty. The Deathless sacred grove..."

Jeansen practiced his Homeric supplication, intoning carefully through his nose. The words as they buzzed through his nasal passages tickled. He sneezed several times rapidly, a light punctuation to the verses. Then he continued:

".....The Deathless sacred grove
Men call them, and with iron
never cut."

He could say the words perfectly now, his sounds rounded and full. The newly learned Greek rolled off his tongue. He had always been a fast study. Greek was his fifth language, if he counted Esperanto. He could even, on occasion, feel the meanings that hid behind the ancient poetry, but as often the meanings slid away, slippery little fish and he the incompetent angler.

He had come to Greece because he wanted to be known as the American Olivier, the greatest classical actor the States had ever produced. He told interviewers he planned to learn Greek—classic Greek, not the Greek of the streets—to show them Oedipus from the amphitheaters where it had first been played. He would stand in the groves of Artemis, he had said, and call the Goddess to him in her own tongue. One columnist even suggested that with his looks and voice and reputation she would be crazy not to come. If she did, Jeansen thought to himself, smiling, I wouldn't treat her with any great distance. The goddesses like to play at shopgirls; the shopgirls, goddesses. And they all, he knew only too well, liked grand gestures.

And so he had traveled to Greece, not the storied isles of Homer but the fume-clogged port of Pyreus, where a teacher with a mouthful of broken teeth and a breath only a harpy could love had taught him. But mouth and breath aside, he was a fine teacher and Jeansen a fine learner. Now he was ready. Artemis first, a special for PBS, and then the big movie. Oedipus starring *the* Jeansen Forbes.

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Only right now all he could feel was the buzz of air, diaphragm against lungs, lungs to larynx, larynx to vocal chords, a mechanical vibration. Buzz, buzz, buzz.

He shook his head as if to clear it, and the well-cut blonde hair fell perfectly back in place. He reached a hand up to check it, then looked around the grove slowly, admiringly. The grass was long, uncut, but trampled down. The trees—he had not noticed it at first—were a strange mixture: birch and poplar, apple and oak. He was not a botanist, but it seemed highly unlikely that such a mix would have simply sprung up. Perhaps they had been planted years and years ago. *Note to himself, check on that.*

This particular grove was far up on Mount Cynthus, away from any roads and paths. He had stumbled on it by accident. Happy accident. But it was perfect, open enough for re-enacting some of the supplicatory dances and songs, but the trees thick enough to add mystery. The guide book said that Cynthus had once been sacred to the Huntress, virgin Artemis, Diana of the moon. He liked that touch of authenticity. Perhaps her ancient worshippers had first seeded the glade. Even if he could not find the documentation, he could suggest it in such a way as to make it sound true enough.

Jeansen walked over to one birch, a young tree, slim and gracefully bending. He ran his hands down its white trunk. He rubbed a leaf between his fingers and considered the camera focusing on the action. He slowed the movement to a sensuous stroking. *Close up of hand and leaf, full frame.*

Next to the birch was an apple, so full of blossoms there was a small fall of petals puddling the ground. He pushed them about tentatively with his boot. Even without wind, more petals drifted from the tree to the ground. *Long tracking shot as narrator kicks through the pile of white flowers, lap dissolve to a single blossom.*

Standing back from the birch and the apple tree, tall and unbending, was a mature oak. It looked as if it were trying to keep the others from getting close. Its reluctance to enter the circle of trees made Jeansen move over to it. Then he smiled at his own fancies. He was often, he knew, too fanciful, yet such invention was also one of his great strengths as an actor. He took off his knapsack and set it down at the foot of the oak like an offering. Then he turned and leaned against the tree, scratching between his shoulder blades with the rough bark. *Long shot of man in grove, move in slowly for tight close-up. Voice over.*

> "But when the fate of death is
> drawing near, First wither on the
> earth the beauteous trees, The
> bark around them wastes, the
> branches fall, And the Nymph's
> soul, at the same moment, leaves
> The sun's fair light."

He let two tears funnel down his cheeks. Crying was easy. He could call

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upon tears whenever he wanted to, even before a word was spoken in a scene. They meant nothing anymore. *Extremely tight shot on tear, then slow dissolve to...*

A hand touched his face, reaching around him from behind. Startled, Jeansen grabbed at the arm, held, and turned.

"Why do you water your face?"

He stared. It was a girl, scarcely in her teens, with the clearest complexion he had ever seen and flawless features, except for a crescent scar at her throat which somehow made the rest more perfect. His experienced eyes traveled quickly down her body. She was naked under a light green chiffon shift. He wondered where they had gotten her, what she wanted. A part in the special?

"Why do you water your face?" she asked again. Then this time she added, "You are a man." It was almost a question. She moved around before him and knelt unself-consciously.

Jeansen suddenly realized she was speaking ancient Greek. He had thought her English with that skin. But the hair was black with blue-green highlights. Perhaps she *was* Greek.

He held her face in his hands and tilted it up so that she met him eye to eye. The green of her eyes was unbelievable. He thought they might be lenses, but saw no telltale double impresion in the eye.

Jeansen chose his words with care, but first he smiled, the famous slow smile printed on posters and magazine covers. "You," he said, pronouncing the Greek with gentle precision, his voice carefully low and tremulous, "you are a goddess."

She leaped up and drew back, holding her hands before her. "No, no," she cried, her voice and body registering such fear that Jeansen rejected it at once. This was to be a classic play, not a horror flick.

But even if she couldn't act, she was damned beautiful. He closed his eyes for a moment, imprinting her face on his memory. And he thought for a moment of her pose, the hands held up. There had been something strange about them. She had too many—or too few—fingers. He opened his eyes to check them, and she was gone.

"Damned bit players," he muttered at last, angry to have wasted so much time on her. He took the light tent from his pack and set it up. Then he went to gather sticks for a fire. It could get pretty cold in the mountains in early spring, or so he had been warned.

From the shelter of the tree, Arrhiza watched the man. He moved gracefully, turning, gesturing, stooping. His voice was low and full of music and he spoke the prayers with great force. Why had she been warned that men were coarse, unfeeling creatures? He was far more beautiful then any of the worshippers who came cautiously at dawn in their black-beetle dresses,

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creeping down the paths like great nicophorus from the hidden chambers of earth, to lift their year-scarred faces to the sky. They brought only jars of milk, honey, and oil, but he came bringing a kind of springy joy. And had he not wept when speaking of the death of trees, the streams from his eyes as crystal as any that ran near the grove? Clearly this man was neither coarse nor unfeeling.

A small breeze stirred the top branches, and Arrhiza glanced up for a moment, but even the sky could not hold her interest today. She looked back at the stranger, who was pulling oddments from his pack. He pounded small nails into the earth, wounding it with every blow, yet did not fear its cries.

Arrhiza was shocked. What could he be doing? Then she realized he was erecting a dwelling of some kind. It was unthinkable—yet this stranger had thought it. No votary would dare stay in a sacred grove past sunfall, dare carve up the soil on which the trees of the Huntress grew. To even think of being near when the Dance began was a desecration. And to see the Huntress, should She visit this glade at moonrise was to invite death. Arrhiza shivered. She was well-schooled in the history of Acteon, torn by his own dogs for the crime of spying upon Her.

Yet this man was unafraid. As he worked, he raised his voice—speaking, laughing, weeping, singing. He touched the trees with bold, unshaking hands. It was the trees, not the man, who trembled at his touch. Arrhiza shivered again, remembering the feel of him against the bark, the muscles hard under the fabric of his shirt. Not even the Huntress had such a back.

Then perhaps, she considered, this fearless votary was not a man at all. Perhaps he was a god come down to tease her, test her, take her by guile or by force. Suddenly, she longed to be wooed.

"You are a goddess," he had said. And it had frightened her. Yet only a god would dare such a statement. Only a god, such as Eros, might take time to woo. She would wait and let the night reveal him. If he remained untouched by the Huntress and unafraid, she would know.

Jeansen stood in front of the tent and watched the sun go down. It seemed to drown itself in blood, the sky bathed in an elemental red that was only slowly leeched out. Evening, however, was an uninteresting entre-act. He stirred the coals on his campfire and climbed into the tent. *Lap dissolve...*

Lying in the dark, an hour later, still sleepless, he thought about the night. He often went camping by himself in the California mountains, away from the telephone and his fans. *Intercut other campsites.* He knew enough to carry a weapon against marauding mountain lions or curious bears. But the silence of this Greek night was

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more disturbing than all the snufflings and howlings in the American dark. He had never heard anything so complete before—no crickets, no wind, no creaking of trees.

He turned restlesly and was surprised to see that the tent side facing the grove was backlit by some kind of diffused lighting. Perhaps it was the moon. It had become a screen, and shadow women seemed to dance across it in patterned friezes. It had to be a trick of his imagination, trees casting silhouettes. Yet without wind, how did they move?

As he watched, the figures came more and more into focus, clearly women. This was no trick of imagination, but of human proposing. If it was one of the columnists or some of his erstwhile friends... Try to frighten him, would they? He would give them a good scare instead.

He slipped into his khaki shorts and found the pistol in his pack. Moving stealthily, he stuck his head out of the tent. And froze.

Instead of the expected projector, he saw real women dancing, silently beating out a strange exotic rhythm. They touched, stepped, circled. There was no music that he could hear, yet not one of them misstepped. And each was as lovely as the girl he had met in the grove.

Jeansen wondered briefly if they were local girls hired for an evening's work. But they were each so incredibly beautiful, it seemed unlikely they could all be from any one area. Then suddenly realizing it didn't matter, that he could simply watch and enjoy it, Jeansen chuckled to himself. It was the only sound in the clearing. He settled back on his haunches and smiled.

The moon rose slowly as if reluctant to gain the sky. Arrhiza watched it silver the landscape. Tied to its rising, she was pulled into the Dance.

Yet as she danced a part of her rested still within the tree, watching. And she wondered. Always before, without willing it, she was wholly a part of the Dance. Whirling, stepping along with the other dryads, their arms, her arms; their legs, her legs. But now she felt as cleft as a tree struck by a bolt. The watching part of her trembled in anticipation.

Would the man emerge from his hasty dwelling? Would he prove himself a god? She watched and yet she dared not watch, each turn begun and ended with the thought, the fear.

And then his head appeared between the two curtains of his house, his bare shoulders, his bronzed and muscled chest. His face registered first a kind of surprise, then a kind of wonder, and at last delight. There was no fear. He laughed and his laugh was more powerful than the moon. It drew her to him and she danced slowly before her god.

Setting: moon-lit glade. 30-35 girls dancing. No Busby Berkley kicklines,

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please. Try for a frenzied yet sensuous native dance. Robbins? Sharp? Ailey? Absolutely no dirndles. Light make-up. No spots. Diffused light. Music: an insistent pounding, feet on grass. Maybe a wild piping. Wide shot of entire dance then lap dissolve to single dancer. She begins to slow down, dizzy with anticipation, dread. Her god has chosen her...

Jeansen stood up as one girl turned slowly around in front of him and held out her arms. He leaned forward and caught her up, drew her to him.

A god is different, thought Arrhiza, as she fell into his arms. They tumbled onto the fragrant grass.

He was soft where the Huntress was hard, hard where She was soft. His smell was sharp, of earth and mold; Hers was musk and air.

"Don't leave," he whispered, though Arrhiza had made no movement to go. "I swear I'll kill myself if you leave." He pulled her gently into the canvas dwelling.

She went willingly though she knew that a god would say no such thing. Yet knowing he was but a man, she stayed and opened herself under him, drew him in, felt him shudder above her, then heavily fall. There was thunder outside the dwelling and the sound of dogs growling. Arrhiza heard it all and, hearing, did not care. The Dance outside had ended abruptly. She breathed gently in his ear, "It is done."

He grunted his acceptance and rolled over onto his side, staring at nothing but a hero's smile playing across his face. Arrhiza put her hand over his mouth to silence him and he brought up his hand to hers. He counted the fingers with his own and sighed. It was then that the lightning struck, breaking her tree, her home, her heart, her life.

She was easy, Jeansen thought. Beautiful and silent and easy, the best sort of woman. He smiled into the dark. He was still smiling when the tree fell across the tent, bringing the canvas down around them and crushing three of his ribs. A spiky branch pierced his neck, ripping the larynx. He pulled it out frantically and tried to scream, tried to breath. A ragged hissing of air through the hole was all that came out. He reached for the girl and fainted.

Three old women in black dresses found him in the morning. They pushed the tree off the tent, off Jeansen, and half carried, half dragged him down the mountainside. They found no girl.

He would live, the doctor said through gold and plaster teeth, smiling proudly.

Live. Jeansen turned the word over in his mind, bitterer than any tears. In Greek or in English, the word meant little to him now. *Live.* His handsome face unmarred by the fallen tree seemed to crack apart with the effort to keep from crying. He shaped the word with his lips but no sound passed them.

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Those beautiful, melodious words would never come again. His voice had leaked out of his neck with his blood.

Camera moves in silently for a tight close-up. Only sounds are routine hospital noises; and mounting over them to an overpowering cacophony is a steady, harsh, rasping breathing, as credits roll.

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The fact is, I do have a golden retriever (named Howard, not Jenny, and who, last time I looked, was alive and well and chewing on unsolicited manuscripts). But — nothing else in this incredible and incredibly funny gathering of editorial correspondence bears any resemblance to reality past or future (I hope). Eric Norden is a free lance writer who, last time we spoke to him, was doing an interview with Gordon Liddy for Playboy.

The Curse of the Mhondoro Nkabele

BY

ERIC NORDEN

329 East 8th Street
New York, N.Y. 10009
May 10, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
The Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

Esteemed Editor Ferman:

As one who peruses your illustrious periodical with great admiration and enjoyment, please permit me to submit for your attention one of my own humble literary efforts.

Hoping to hear from you forthwith, I remain

Your obedient servant,
O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
May 23, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009

Dear Mr. Nkabele:

Thank you for letting us see ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS. I'm afraid it does not meet our current editorial requirements.

Sincerely,
Edward L. Ferman

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
May 25, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

PERSONAL & CONFIDENTIAL

Esteemed Editor Ferman:

I'm afraid, as is sometimes unavoidable in all great publishing enterprises, that there has been a clerical error on the part of your staff. I have just received a letter, bearing what can only be a facsimile of your signature,

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returning my manuscript ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS, which I know you will be most anxious to publish. At first I was sorely troubled by this misunderstanding, but I soon realized that one of your overzealous underlings, as yet unfamiliar with my name, took it upon himself to reject my work unread. Thus I am resubmitting ASTRID, as well as two more of my latest stories, with instructions that they are for your eyes only. Do not be too harsh on the unwitting culprit, dear Editor Ferman, as such debacles are not unknown in literary history. The initial reception of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is but one case in point....

I should appreciate your check to be made out to cash, as I have not as yet opened a banking account in this city.

Hoping to hear from you forthwith, I remain

Your obedient servant,
O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
June 12, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, N.Y. 10009

Dear Mr. Nkabele:

Thank you for letting us see SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN and URSULA OF URANUS. I'm sorry to say that, as was the case with your original story, neither piece meets our present needs.

If you are contemplating further submissions, I should point out to you that as a matter of editorial policy we require all manuscripts to be *typed*, perferably on white, unlined paper, and on only one side of the page. Manuscripts should also be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.

Sincerely,
Edward L. Ferman

329 East 8th Street
New York, N.Y. 10009
June 19, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

Esteemed Editor Ferman:

How clumsy I have been! Please excuse my unforgiveable ignorance of publishing requirements in your great country, and my thoughtlessness in inflicting on you my, let us be frank, less than decipherable calligraphy. With considerable good fortune I have found an accomplished typist, Ms. Rachel Markowitz, a fellow student at New York University's Washington Square Campus where I am matriculating, who has most graciously consented to prepare my manuscripts in the prescribed manner, and at most reasonable rates. Ms. Markowitz, a most gracious and charming young lady, has also, if it is not immodest to say so, developed a great admiration for my *oeuvre*, and has volunteered to assist me in the intricacies of American publishing, with particular emphasis

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on what she refers to a subsidiary rights. If you have any questions on such matters, I suggest you address them directly to her. (She may be reached, for the time being, at the above address.)

In any case, I am happy to resubmit, in the desired format, ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS, SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN and URSULA OF URANUS. If you should wish to make one check payable for all three works, that would be quite satisfactory.

Hoping to hear from you forthwith, and with abject apologies for my execrable scrawl, I remain

Your obedient servant,
O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

P.S. I am enclosing Ms. Markowitz's typing bill, as well as a receipt for the unlined white paper you specified.

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
June 25, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, N.Y. 10009

Dear Mr. Nkabele:

I'm afraid I'm somewhat at a loss for words. I had hoped my previous letter made it clear that I *had* read all three of your stories, despite their being handwritten, and could not use any of them. The fault, I'm afraid, lies least of all in format.

Sheer pressure of time normally precludes editorial evaluation of unsolicited manuscripts, but in this case I would strongly suggest you study the more recent work in the field, particularly Harlan Ellison's two DANGEROUS VISIONS anthologies and the annual collection of Nebula Award stories. Your own work, frankly, is unpublishable as it now stands, although I will admit you have rather neatly captured the tone and texture of 1940s "space opera." There have been vast changes in the field since the heyday of the pulps, however, and there is no longer a market for such material, even in juveniles. If you were aiming at parody, that fails too—why flog a long-dead b.e.m.? And I'm afraid your treatment is so relentlessly serious it might evoke the worst kind of literary laughter—the unintended.

I hope you won't be too discouraged by these comments. You display a flair for vivid action prose, and your plots, though hackneyed, are tightly structured. There does, however, seem to be a language problem on occasion. *"Zut alors!"*, *"sacre bleu"* and *"nom d'un chien"* are, so far as I know, no longer in common parlance, even in France. I am not sure of the etymological derivation of *"Zounds!"* but it, too, is an uncommon expletive in contemporary English-language s-f. Am I correct in assuming that French is your native language? If so, any problems in translation could be ameliorated by the wider reading in modern s-f I suggested earlier.

I would also caution you to beware the pitfalls of conceptual, as well as linguistic, anachronism. I.e., it is unlikely that the Mary Tyler Moore

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Show would be a weekly staple on the vidscreens of the humanoid colony on 31st Century Venus which you describe in SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN, particularly after widespread intermarriage with the amphibious Mottled Marsh Marsupials and the attendant changes in sexuality and sensibility. In a different vein, but equally jarring, the Gargons of Ganymede you depict in URSULA OF URANUS are, so far as I can gather, no more than oversized purple lobsters, and it's unlikely they would have the capability, much less the desire, to ravish Ursula and her friends. (Avoid euphemism as well as anachronism, as in "Ursula's mammoth mammary protuberances heaved in horror as she watched the slimy giant crustacean approach....")

I could go on, but I hope these criticisms have been both constructive and helpful. I'll be happy to see your future work, but remember: *study the market*. That is really the best advice I can give any aspiring writer.

Sincerely,
Edward L. Ferman

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
June 29, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My Dear Mr. Ferman:

I am in receipt of your missive of 25th June, and, in all honesty, *I* am the one at a loss for words. I find it both shocking and profoundly disturbing that you have so totally misunderstood my work. My sole remaining hope at this stage of our relationship is that a frank and forthright discussion of our differences may dissuade you from the creatively suicidal course you are pursuing. I am thinking not only of your own reputation, Mr. Ferman, but of your periodical's; I should certainly regret being forced by your blindness (a temporary condition, I trust) to take my work to your competitors. Therefore, in a spirit of openness and good will that hopefully will lead to dialogue and understanding, let me confront the major issues you raise in your communication.

Yes, you are correct in surmising that English is not my native language, but neither is French. I was born twenty-nine years ago in the town of Kaolak, in the eastern recesses of Senegal, by the Falémé River. My "first" language was Diola, the tongue of my people, although under the colonial administration French was the official language of the country, and useful in that it allowed the main tribes—Diolas, Fulas and Mandingos—to communicate with one another. (You may have remarked that our illustrious President, His Excellency Léopold Senghor, the great poet and philosopher who first conceived "negritude" as a literary and cultural belief system, wrote in French so that he could be understood by all his people.) My father, Sikhalo, was paramount chief of our

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people and my uncle, Nbulamauti, was the *mganga*, or spiritual counselor of our tribe, and a learned master of *uchawi*, our indigenous religion. The Diolas are traditionally animist, but my father sent me at the age of nine to the mission school in Mbawne Province run by the Holy Ghost Fathers, a predominantly French and Belgian order. There I mastered not only French but, through the good offices of Father Devlin, the one Irish priest, English as well.

I originally had some doubts about the missionaries, but my father approved the doctrine of transubstantiation, viewing it as an affirmation of our own ancient practices. He himself, as a very young child, had once tasted a priest, of the Franciscan order I believe, and he felt that consuming the blood and flesh of Christ would be a salutary experience for me. You and I, Mr. Ferman, would of course interpret this as poetic allegory, as Mr. Melville did so evocatively in his great fish story, but my father is close to the earth. In any case, I was soon quite content at the school, due mainly to the blessed Father Devlin, a good and gentle man who took me, so to speak, under his wing. It was also due to Father Devlin that I had my first exposure to science fiction, at the age of eleven.

This brings me to your contention (the word "criticism" would unduly dignify what can most generously be adjudged a misapprehension) that I am not *au courant* with the science fiction field. It is to laugh! Due to Father Devlin, who had become a devotee while a parish priest in Newark, New Jersey, U.S.A., I was nurtured on science fiction as on my mother's milk. When Father Devlin arrived in Senegal in 1953 he had with him *three* steamer trunks packed with his lifetime collection of s-f, over five hundred magazines, ranging from the marvelous *Thrilling Wonder Stories, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Super Science Stories* and *Planet* to the more intellectual journals such as *Startling* and *Amazing Stories*, and dating from 1936 to 1952. Under his diligent tutelage I pored over these treasure troves of the imagination, star-borne through their pages to the nethermost reaches of the cosmos. By the age of fourteen I had memorized many stories by heart, and was a particular fan of Robert Moore Williams, E.E. "Doc" Smith, Nelson Bond, Ray Cummings, Eric Frank Russell, P. Schuyler Miller, Raymond Z. Gallun, the revered Stanley G. Weinbaum, L. Ron Hubbard and the magnificant Richard Shaver, so brilliantly discovered by my favorite editor, Ray A. Palmer of *Amazing Stories*. ("Dear Rap," where are you now? *Où sont les neiges d'antan?*) Study the market, Mr. Ferman? I dare say I know the market as well as any living fan. It is true that I have only been in the United States under my exchange scholarship for two months now, and have not yet read a great many of the more recent magazines

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and books, but what better apprenticeship could I have! Ever since I was a day-dreaming boy, Mr. Ferman, sometimes misunderstood by the other children because of my stocky build (which Ms. Markowitz, who is typing this, singularly admires, being similarly well-endowed herself), I have immersed myself in s-f, lived s-f, dreamed s-f, eaten s-f as my daily millet. How often were the times as an adolescent that I would slip away from school, clutching a treasured copy of *Amazing Stories*, and sit under a tamarind or baobab tree, mute in joy and wonder at the magical universes into which I was transported, oblivious to all around me. Even as the other lads stole into the bush with giggling young maidens to play hide-the-snake, I was riding the asteroid belts, or battling the dreaded deros in their eldritch caverns beneath the earth, or winning the hand of a Martian princess. And you suggest *I* am ignorant of this field? The mind boggles, Mr. Ferman. The mind positively boggles.

But let us return to our muttons. I will not deign to comment on your specific references to my work (others, less charitably inclined, might employ the word "nit-picking") or on the somewhat condescending tone of your letter. That, Mr. Ferman, is something better left to you and your conscience. I am, however, for the third and *final* time, submitting to you ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS, SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN and URSULA OF URNAUS. I hope and trust you will read them with a fresh insight and a new spirit, untainted by whatever animus perverted your initial perusal. (Could it be that you, like Father Devlin, are plagued by "the bottle sickness," and the distortions of mood and perception it engenders? This would explain much.) In any case, Mr. Ferman, I wish you well, and can only hope that the blinders will be struck from your eyes, and my work revealed to you as what it truly is—the most significant contribution to the corpus of science fiction since Stanley G. Weinbaum. If not, I am afraid I will be forced to consider alternative markets.

Yours,

O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

P.S. Ms. Markowitz, who is conversant with such matters, points out that the only prominent black writer in s-f today is Samuel "Chip" Delany, and wonders if your obtuseness could be motivated by racialism. I will reserve judgment on this matter.

P.P.S. If my earlier surmise was correct, I commend to your attention a morning-after concoction I used to prepare for Father Devlin, and which appreciably improved both his health and temper: a calabash containing the juice of three paw-paws and two limes, leavened with the slightest *soupcon* of fresh palm oil and a dash of tabasco. Ideally, this should be followed by a light repast of manioc, mealies and wild figs, the latter consumed in moderation.

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Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
July 7, 1980

Mr. O.T.Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009

Dear Mr. Nkabele:

Mr. Ferman has asked me to return the enclosed manuscripts to you. Thank you for thinking of F&SF.

Sincerely,
James T. Leasor
Assistant to the Editor

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
July 10, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My dear Mr. Ferman:

I am dismayed at the evident breakdown in communication between us. I urgently suggest a face-to-face meeting to iron out the misunderstandings that have arisen, either in Connecticut or here in New York City. Please ring me any time of the day or night at area code 212, 675-4709. (Feel free to reverse the charges.) My calendar is free for the next two weeks, and I am completely at your disposal.

Dear Mr. Ferman, we must end this petty bickering and get down to a serious evaluation of my work. I am sure that if we sat together over a sundowner and discussed the situation, your attitude would soon change. We owe this not only to each other, but to the field of science fiction we both love so dearly.

With warmest affection,
O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
July 19, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009

Dear Mr. Nkabele:

I must admit that my irritation over your earlier letter has taken some time to subside. I was particularly put off by your veiled accusation of racism, which was really a cheap shot. There are relatively few black s-f writers for the same reason there are still relatively few blacks prominent in other areas of American life and literature: a 300-year-old legacy of oppression and exclusion does not die easily. There is, however, no conspiracy to exclude blacks from s-f; just the opposite, in fact. Furthermore, it would be the rankest kind of paternalistic condescension, if not reverse racism, for me to treat your work any differently, or to qualify my criticism, simply because of your skin color. So let's bury that red herring once and for all. You are obviously as defensive about your work as any fledgling writer, but I must warn you that your overly touchy attitude will only serve to antagonize other editors in the field.

Which brings me to the reason I am, after all, resuming our correspondence. I must admit that, after my in-

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itial annoyance had worn off, I was rather intrigued, and even touched, by your description of growing up on a diet of pulp s-f in the heart of Africa. One problem in our field, due both to parochialism and translation difficulties, is that we know regrettably little about s-f outside the English-speaking world. There have, of course, been some good volumes of Russian and Eastern European s-f published here (Sanislaw Lem, obviously), and we occasionally see some French work, while Judith Merrill has just begun translating Japanese s-f into English. There are also several foreign-language editions of F&SF, and we receive some feedback from writers and readers in the countries where they appear. But otherwise we are relatively ignorant of what is (or is not) being written in vast areas of the world. Africa, of course, is a case in point. I have heard there is some s-f being published in Nigeria, but this has only reached my attention because it's in English, which is still the *lingua franca* there. So the whole subject of African s-f fascinates me, as does your own story of your childhood addiction to the vintage pulps. This is obviously the root of your current literary problems, of course; you are still writing in a style that was out of date twenty years ago. But before you bridle, let me suggest that your background also holds the germs of an intriguing article idea.

I would like you to write up your childhood experiences for us, a personal memoir telling how you first came into contact with Western s-f and fell in love with it, and how it affected your life. What was it like to be a teenager from tribal Africa immersed in the alien world of American s-f? How did your family and fellow students react? How did it color your view of the United States when you first came here? Did you ever feel excluded by the technologically advanced, all-white societies depicted in most of the stories of that time? How did science fiction change your view of yourself, your village, your tribe? How did you translate the work into an African cultural matrix? I think the answers to all these questions would be fascinating to our readers, and provide them with a totally fresh perspective on s-f. We rarely run articles, with the exception of Dr. Asimov's monthly science column, but perhaps we could carry it as an extended book review section, or maybe, who knows, as part of a general symposium on Third World s-f. I obviously can't use your fiction, as I've tried so unavailingly to make clear, but this could break you into print at the same time you're updating your knowledge of contemporary s-f. (Believe me, my advice in that area is *not* condescending; it is vital.)

Now to the less pleasant side of this assignment. You would have to tone down your florid style, and avoid rhetorical overkill. Bear in mind Hemingway's wise adage: kill your darlings. And I'd have to exact a promise

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in advance that you won't quibble over my editorial blue pencil. Don't take this the wrong way, please; you have a talent, but it's not only anachronistic in content but stylistically undisciplined. The first may be more easily corrected than the second, but I'm willing to have a go.

Finally, let me add that I appreciate the conciliatory tone of your last letter. I hope it won't sound pompous if I say that I rarely enter into prolonged correspondence with unknown authors. I simply don't have the time; nor, to be frank, in most cases the inclination. But I was moved by your childhood experiences and I think our readers could be too. Think about it.

Best,
Edward L. Ferman

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
July 23, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

Esteemed Editor Ferman:

I welcome your letter, as it reveals a distinct thaw in our relationship. I always knew that, on reflection, you would realize the futility, if not self-destructiveness, of your earlier attitude.

As to your suggestion, I am afraid it poses certain problems. I have always intended to write my autobiography, but I do not think the time is yet ripe. First my work must be accepted by a large audience in America and abroad, which is why publication of my short stories is a vital prerequisite. I would also publish initially in hard-cover, so that the book clubs and Hollywood could bid on the rights. Ms. Markowitz assures me this is most important. I would, of course, be happy for F&SF to serialize it in whole or part, subject, of course, to mutually satisfactory financial terms.

We are, however, getting a bit ahead of ourselves on this. Thus, I am enclosing a revised version of SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN, tailored to meet your objection about the sexual preferences of the Gargons of Ganymede. They are no longer giant crustaceans but giant gerbils which, being mammalian, should have no difficulty consummating their lustful desires for Ursula. I hope this will prove a token of my willingness to meet you halfway.

I must reiterate my desire for a personal meeting, and as soon as possible. These matters should be ideally considered on what Ms. Markowitz so aptly terms a one-to-one basis. I would be more than happy to visit you in Connecticut at your convenience.

With warmest affection,
O.T. Nkabele, Esq.

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
July 29, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street

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New York, New York 10009
Dear Mr. Nkabele:

Mr. Ferman has asked me to return SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN to you. He does not believe further correspondence on the matter would prove productive.

Sincerely,
James T. Leasor
Assistant to the Editor

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
August 8, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
Dear Oginga:

Once again, I want to thank you for your most gracious gifts. The silver-chased *assegai* is hanging above the fireplace as I write this, and the beautiful carved wood fertility statue has a place of honor in my study. I really shouldn't have accepted such magnificent, and obviously valuable, presents from you; it must have been that last "sundowner" you prepared that undermined my resistance. (The next morning it seemed as if the sun *had* set, and permanently!) But be assured that I am grateful.

I am, in retrospect, very glad you came up. After my initial surprise wore off at encountering you in my local barber shop, of all places, I was relieved that you had reconsidered your earlier attitudes and were willing to make a serious effort to improve and update your work. I'm afraid I had rather given up on you after that last letter, which I hope explains my initial coolness when we met, but I am pleased my words had some impact, however belated. Anyway, that's all water under the bridge, and I anxiously await the first draft of your autobiographical article, SAFARI TO WONDER: THE PULPS AND I. (I think we should discuss that title further, but it will do for now.) I also hope the books I loaned you will be of some help in modernizing your knowledge of s-f.

By the way, my memories of the latter part of the evening are rather dim, but by any chance did you leave a small pouch of animal skin behind at my place? I found it under my pillow the next morning, and I assumed it was another of your generous gifts, perhaps a good-luck fetish. It is filled with bits of bone, feathers, dirt, hair, beads, cowrie shells, scraps of cloth, lumps of iron and a tiny clay figurine pinned down with wooden pegs and pierced with thorns in the head and heart. If it was a present, thanks once again, but if you lost it just let me know and I'll mail it off to you.

Good luck on the article!

Best regards,
Ed

P.S. You mentioned that your major at N.Y.U. is physiotherapy. Would you recommend massage as a cure for persistent headaches that are unresponsive to medication? I've had the granddaddy of them all for the past few days now, and nothing seems to work. (Or

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maybe I *do* need that recipe you concocted for your Irish mentor!) Seriously, if you have any suggestions let me know, as it's beginning to affect my concentration.

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
August 12, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My dear friend Ed:

Thank you so much for your gracious letter. I too shall treasure the delightful evening at your home, rendered doubly poignant by the turbulent course of our prior relationship. But, like the famous journalist Stanley and the intrepid explorer Livingstone, our reunion was memorable precisely because of those obstacles of mutual misunderstanding that preceded and impeded it. Now, however, our collaboration has begun! Let it be both creatively fruitful and financially remunerative. (The latter is the least of my considerations, of course, but, as a saying of my people has it, "The man without mealie does not sing songs.")

The pouch you refer to is, as you surmise, a good-luck charm or *ju-ju*, a small token of my affection for you. It may be worn around the neck or simply kept within the hut as a ward against malign spirits. And, yes, therapeutic massage is *very* good for headache.

I also want to thank you for the novels and collections of short stories. I have not as yet read them all, but I must confess I am shocked and depressed at the profound deterioration in our field since my apprenticeship in Africa. It is obvious that I was blessed with exposure to the Golden Age of science fiction, and that the downward spiral towards decadence and decay has accelerated horrendously since the midfifties. Writers like Theordore Sturgeon, whom I remember from an earlier, healthier stage in his career, particularly disturb me, as they must know the birthright they are betraying. (If I may be permitted a note of levity, the eggs Sturgeon lays are far from caviar!) Certainly, his current stories would never have been accepted by *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in the glorious days gone by. And this Barry Malzberg you suggested I read —my word, dear Edward, surely he is afflicted of the Gods! The man is a veritable pustulence on the face of the universe, a yellow dog barking in the night. We have another saying in my tribe, "The jackal dreams lions' dreams." How true! How tragically true. And how a creature such as Malzberg would cringe and whimper if ever confronted with the shade of Stanley G. Weinbaum, the Great Master himself. And these women, Ursula LeGuin and Joanna Russ, they should be beaten with stout sticks! I would not give one hamstrung goat for the pair of them. (It is apposite here to reflect on the words of the good Dr. Johnson, who pointed out that "A

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woman's preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs; it is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.") Of all the stories I have read recently, only Kilgore Trout's *Venus on the Half Shell* is worthy to bear the mantle of the giants of yesteryear. Truly, my good friend, the field we love is facing terrible times, and it is indeed providential that I have arrived on the scene to arrest the rot. Perhaps, in fact, there was a Larger Purpose of Father Devlin's introducing me to science fiction. We shall see.

I have not yet got around to Mr. Ellison's books, but I am glad you told me he experiments with new work in his DANGEROUS VISIONS series. I have sent him several of my stories, and expect a prompt and enthusiastic reply. And thank you once again for providing me with his home address and unlisted phone number. Perhaps the three of us, united, can yet cleanse the science fiction temple of this babbling *canaille!*

Once more, thank you for a delightful weekend. Looking out my window at the squalor of what the natives call the East Village, I can only wish I were back with you in Connecticut. Your Cornwall is so green and beautiful, I can understand why the game hens flourish. I hope on my next trip you will introduce me to Daphne de Maurier, an old favorite of mine, and we can find time to visit some of your picturesque tin mines and smugglers' coves.

Hoping to see you again soon, I remain

Your devoted pal,
Oginga
(You may call me Oggy.)

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
August 16, 1980

Mr. Harlan Ellison
Villa Van Vogt
9264 Easton Drive
Beverly Hills, California 90210

Dear Harlan:

I'm afraid I owe you something of an apology. It's a long story, but I'm being pursued by a young African exchange student who fancies himself another Heinlein—or, God save us all, another Stanley G. Weinbaum. It's an interesting story, actually, he was brought up in a remote area of Senegal on a diet of 1940s pulp s-f, and he writes and thinks like a reincarnated ha'penny-a-word hack. (I thought I'd partially converted him, but after his last letter I have some doubts.) Anyway, after an exchange of letters that you wouldn't believe he showed up in Cornwall and collared me, all 300 pounds of him. (Wrapped in a *dashiki* that would blind you at forty paces.) I couldn't help feeling sorry for the kid, he's like a big fat puppy, so I took him back to the house for a talk and a few drinks. He seemed contrite, said he recognized the problems with his writing, and we worked up an article on how he grew up in the jungle on a diet of space opera. Could be quite

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good, really, though God knows I'll have a hell of a re-write job on my hands. But the point of all this is that I got royally plastered, for the first time in years—funny too, I don't remember drinking that much—and apparently gave him your address and phone number in a fit of alcoholic fugue. Your *home* number.

Now I know what you're going to say, Harlan, but have pity. Every Ellison has his Brutus, and you can always change your number and/or move. If you think I'm joking, wait 'till the phone calls start. I know my man. Actually, I hope he doesn't give you too hard a time, but he's a persistent cuss and I suggest you let him down gently. Otherwise, he's liable to turn up in *your* barber shop!

I haven't had a chance to read your new piece yet, the work is piling up and I haven't been too well lately. I've got the damndest headache, I can't seem to shake it, and I'm a little worried about my hearing. There's a kind of constant, staccato beating in my inner ear, it sounds almost like drums. I guess I'll have to go to an ee&t man if it keeps up. Ah, well, time's winged chariot hovers on all our heels.

Once again, I'm sincerely sorry for inadvertantly violating your privacy. I hope we'll still be on speaking terms after this, and you'll let me buy you dinner at the Worldcon in atonement. Sans booze!

Best,
Ed

P.S. Could you ask one of your Japanese gardeners what, if anything, can be done about rose blight? All our roses just died overnight, I found the bushes shriveled and black in the morning. And the weather was perfect, too. I really can't understand it, and after all the work I put in it's a bit depressing. Christ, I moved to Connecticut in the first place to tend my garden and avoid the badgering of hot-eyed young geniuses fresh from the Famous Writers' School. Seems I'm not doing too well on either front.

ELLISON ENTERPRISES UNIVERSAL
"Heute gehörten Hollywood,
morgen die ganze welt"
9640 Sunset Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90069
CABLE ADDRESS: ENEMU ORDERS TO GO

August 21, 1980

Edward My Son:

You are forgiven, though reluctantly. Yes, your protege has been pursuing me, like a hound out of hell. I got a batch of his drek in the mail last week, and then the phone calls began. I was polite to the schmuck the first few calls because I hadn't got around to his stuff, and because he said you two were collaborating on some magnum opus or other. It was only because of that I finally sat down and waded through the crap. Jesus, it was god-awful, so ludicrously so that I thought the whole thing was a put-on at first. But nobody, I mean *nobody*, could write that consistently, humor-

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lessly bad without sincerity. Shit, I haven't read such wondrously lobotomized prose in years, it was a real nostalgia trip. He kept calling up pestering me for a reaction and I tried to fob him off, but when he rang at two in the morning last Friday, and me making the beast with two backs on the casting couch, I really told him what I thought of the garbage. He hung up in a tiff and so far, Yahweh be praised, he hasn't called back, either here at the office or at home. It did get a bit hairy for a while though, calls every hour of the night and day. I got to wandering around muttering, 'Who will free me from this turbulent scribe?' Well, so far so good.

The thing is, Ed, you weren't helping the poor turd by encouraging him. To lumber toward a pun, this guy is not the *crème* of the *Senégalèse*. I mean, look, I'm as sympathetic as you are to all the no-talent hacks out there, but you don't do the schlemiels any good by feeding their delusions of grandeur; sometimes, to coin a phrase, you've gotta be cruel to be kind. I will admit that after I got your letter with all that stuff about growing up on the pulps out in Tarzan-land I felt a wee bit guilty about the way I'd dressed him down; but the putz's gotta find out someday that his stuff's unreadable, not to mention unpublishable. And without getting shirty with you, *cher maitre*, who needs it anyway? I mean, you should see the shit I'm getting from the *heavies* for LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS. I sure don't need to comb the boondocks for something even worse. Christ, I've gotta tell writers I like and respect I can't use their pieces, and then you inflict this *merde* on me! No more, Edward. Peace, calm, I beg you. Become a solitary drinker, and spare your friends. The kooks can manage on their own, God knows there are enough of them out there. In fact, one of them left a little leather bag full of what looks like chicken guts and graveyard dirt on my doorstep the other night. Jesus, L.A. is really one huge out-patient clinic. Don't recruit *more* crazies for me!

About your roses, tough titty. My gardeners are at a loss, they say only a sudden frost could kill 'em off all at once, and that's hardly likely in August. Not in your part of the world anyway. But you think you've got problems? My fuckin' hair is falling out! Started yesterday, and it's going as fast as your roses. Jesus, I'm gonna need a friggin' rug soon. Cry your hearts out, ladies. Oh, well, this is the summer of our discontent.

You've got a date for the Worldcon, and it's gonna cost you.

Peace,
Harlan of the Bald Pate

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
August 24, 1980

Mr. Harlan Ellison
Villa Van Vogt
9263 Easton Drive
Beverly Hills, California 90210

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Dear Harlan:

This will sound silly, but could you please describe, in detail, the contents of that pouch you mentioned? I have my reasons, and I would appreciate a quick response. I've tried to call you, but there is no answer.

Our golden retriever, Jenny, is dead. Something seems to have eaten her. Our neighbor, Tom Gould, swears he saw a leopard slinking away into the night. Ridiculous, of course. Could you phone or wire me that information on the pouch? If you call, speak loudly. I can't hear too well over these goddamned drums.

Best regards,
Ed

9623 Easton Drive
Beverly Hills, Calif. 90210
August 27, 1980

Mr. Edward l. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

Edward me darlin':

Sorry you couldn't reach me on the phone, but I've turned the damned thing off for a few days. Oddly enough, I've got a lousy headache myself, and nothing seems to help. Probably overwork, I've been batting my brains out on *The Sound of Screaming*, that TV musical comedy of mine about the Moors Murder Trial in England. Some asshole producer cast Julie Andrews as Myra Hindley, and she's breaking my chops with script revisions. It's my first score, too, and the bitch is ruining the title song. ("And the moors echo now/With the sound of screaminggg....") I'm not too happy with their choice of Donny Osmond for Ian Brady, either.

Anyway, that's my problem. As to the pouch, I threw it away a couple of days ago. Why? Did you get one too? Maybe we're being hexed by that African pal of yours! God, to die so young, like Alexander, with the world in my grasp.... Listen, *mon vieux*, I don't have to go outside the field for my enemies; I can name a half-dozen Hugo winners who are probably fashioning wax images of me right now! But if I get another, I'll send it off to you. Hokay?

Be good, and don't send me any more Stanley Weinbaums, even in blackface.

Love and Kisses,
Harlan

P.S. Hey, seriously, were you playing straight about your dog? If so, I'm really sorry, that's a real bummer. Maybe it was a pack of wild dogs; I hear a lot of abandoned summer pets have gone feral. My sympathies.

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
August 28, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My dear friend Edward:

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It was good talking to you last night. I'm sorry you'd been ringing for the past two days, but I was out of town on business, and Ms. Markowitz was visiting her parents in a place called Great Neck. (How one relishes these exotic, and evocative, American place names!) In fact, when you phoned I had just returned from the airport.

I am most desolate to hear of your troubles. First the headaches, then your roses, and now your poor dog. It is said that these things tend to run in threes, but that is scant consolation for you. I was surprised, I must admit, at your inclination to suspect a supernatural agency behind these sad events. Surely, dear Edward, we are living in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, not in some primitive backwater of medieval times. I will grant you that among my own people such calamities would be ascribed to the intervention of malign spirits, or possibly to one's own guilt rebounding on one in punishment of a sin or grievous error of judgment, and thereby unleashing self-destructive psychic manifestations. In my land it is believed that when one of royal blood is wronged and unable to redreess that wrong himself a *mhondoro*, or "mouthpiece of the spirit," will appear to avenge him. It has been known for the spirit of a great warrior or medicine man to materialize on earth and enter into the body of a wild animal in order to torment and ultimately devour those ignorant or malicious humans who prey like insolent jackals on his hapless descendants. Only the intercession of the original victim, it is said, can break the curse and banish the avenging shades to eternal darkness. But whom have you wronged so deeply, whom have you misunderstood so profoundly, whom have you hurt so callously, as to bring down on your head the wrath of the victim's ancestral spirits? All such conjecture is, in any case, rank superstition, and I am surprised to find a man of your knowledge and sophistication succumbing to it. There must be a perfectly logical explanation for your travails. Must there not?

Without appearing overly sensitive I must also confess that I was troubled by your insinuation that my humble gifts were somehow related to your recent misfortunes. My dear Edward, must our friendship, so recently sealed, now be sundered by hysterical suspicion and paranoid allegation? Permit me to say, as gently as possible, that you are overwrought, and need a good rest. You mention that the noise in your head, which you fancifully describe as drums, is keeping you from sleep. Perhaps that is the root of your problem, and you should consult an alienist of good repute. But always feel free to call on your friend Oginga for advice or consolation.

I am afraid we can dismiss Harlan Ellison as an ally in our crusade to redeem science fiction. I have been in touch with him recently, and he was

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most crudely abusive and insensitive; in fact, at one point he went so far as to threaten legal action if I continued to contact him! I regret to say he is no gentleman, and can be written off as a force for progress in the field. I am afraid, my friend, that the struggle to wrest s-f from the hands of the obfuscators and pornographers is ours alone. It will be a lonely battle, but victory will be all the more sweet for that reason. And remember the tocsin sounded by Edmund Burke, which Father Devlin prophetically taught me so many years ago: "The triumph of evil is insured when good men do nothing."

I have a feeling that you are finally in a receptive mood for SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN, ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS and URSULA OF URANUS, which I am enclosing. Though I hesitate to say so, my friend, it is not impossible that your failure to as yet fully appreciate these works is at the root of your present troubles. Your subconscious may be warring with you, urging you to reconsider and reevaluate my stories, and thus creating severe psychic stress which manifests itself in headaches and auditory hallucinations. Nothing, dear Edward, is impossible. I counsel you to remember that.

With warmest affection,
Your pal,
Oggy

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
September 1, 1980

Dr. Isaac Asimov
Asimov Hall
Asimov State University
Asimovia, New York 14603
Dear Isaac:

God, is it really true about Harlan? I couldn't believe the first press reports, but Fritz Lieber called me from L.A. a little while ago and confirmed it all. The poor devil. I knew it had to come some day, but I always thought it would be at the hands of a fellow writer. Not like this.

I know I was a little incoherent on the phone last night, but I swear that this ties in with what's happening to me. Ellison rebuffed the African too, and look what happened to him. Christ, I may be next! The drums are getting louder every day, and I've developed sharp, stabbing pains in my chest and joints. This morning I found my parakeet dead in his cage, his little neck snapped like a twig. And the cage was *locked*, Isaac, I had the only key. I know you're a confirmed rationalist but I swear to you, I am being hexed! Or voodooed, or hoodooed or whatever the right African name for it is. I don't know whether the bastard intends to kill me too or just terrify me to the point where I'll agree to publish his abominable stories. God, psychic blackmail! But I can't go on like this, I haven't slept for three days, and the pain is getting unbearable. You've got to help me, Isaac, use your encyclopedic knowledge, find an antidote to the curse. Remember M.R. James' *The*

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Casting of the Runes? Maybe there's some way I can hit back, make his damned magic boomerang on him! But I know nothing about these matters, I used to be as thoroughgoing a sceptic as you are. I tried to ask Fritz about it, he's an expert on the occult and the whole thing is so bloody reminiscent of *Conjure Wife*, but the minute I described the *ju-ju* bag and its contents he got all stuttery, made some excuse about having to leave for a trip to Mexico, and hung up. Some friend.

Listen, Isaac, I'm not crazy, no matter how it sounds. You and I have both read about these things actually working in Haiti; well, now they're working in Connecticut. For the love of God, help me!!!! I'm enclosing the ju-ju bag, examine it, tell me what I can do. Should we burn it? Or would that just make things worse? My life and my sanity are in your hands, Isaac. Don't let me down.

Desperately,
Ed

ASIMOV STATE UNIVERSITY

"The Intelligent Have A Right Over The Ignorant, The Right of Instructing Them." —Ralph Waldo Emerson

September 6, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

Dear Ed:

Yes, it was a great tragedy about Harlan. (Not in the Aristotelian sense that great tragedy requires the fall of a great man, of course, but on the human level; after all, even Harlan had a mother who will mourn him, and remember when Harlie was one.) When the first, fragmentary reports came over the news I suspected Harlan had perished by his own hand; he had toiled too long in the literary abattoir of locust-land, and I knew it was exacting a heavy toll. The last time I saw him I quoted Fred Allen's line that "You can take all the sincerity in Hollywood, place it in the navel of a fruit fly and still have room enough for three caraway seeds and a producer's heart." He said nothing, just smiled wanly and twitched several times. Poor Harlan. There will not be another like him.

I've just come back from the funeral in Los Angeles, which is why I'm a little late in responding to your letter. A senior police officer was there and I spoke to him in private, since I'm thinking of doing a mystery based on the case, in the vein of my *Murder at the A.B.A.* The cops still haven't located the zoo or circus from which the giant python escaped, but they are scouring the state. Apparently Harlan was attacked and devoured beside the swimming pool of the Beverly Hills Hotel, on his way to a ceremony in the Polo Lounge where he was to have received his fourth Atilla award from the Screen Writers' Guild West. What bitter irony! The police shot the snake shortly afterwards, when it attempted to consume an elderly lady walking her dog on Mulholland Drive. Apparently it was still hungry.

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I was really glad I attended the funeral. There should have been someone there beside his accountant, whom I suspect showed up only to make sure. (Harlan was already partially digested when they autopsied the python, so the coffin was closed and he went away a bit disappointed.) It was a bittersweet occasion for all of us in s-f.

Now to address myself to the subject of your letter and phone call. Frankly, Ed, you put me in a difficult position. You know I have both respect and affection for you, but it would be dereliction of our friendship to encourage you in this delusion. I'm afraid you've been driving yourself too hard in recent years, far too hard, and this *idée fixe* is obviously the result. You know that I do not have a closed mind; in fact, I fully subscribe to Haldane's Law that the universe is not only queerer than we imagine, it is queerer than we *can* imagine. But that does not mean I have to swallow a lot of nonsensical mumbo-jumbo about hexes and curses and drums and leopards in the night. I'm sorry, Ed, but I'm afraid the problem is all in your troubled mind. Sure, people in Haiti can die of a voodoo hex, *if they believe totally and fanatically in the power of voodoo.* Psychosomatic medicine is still in its infancy, but we do know that individuals can *will* themselves to serious illness and even death. My fear is that this is precisely what is happening to you. I urgently suggest that you contact Dr. Joseph Rauschbusch in New York City, a highly qualified psychoanalyst who worked wonders for Malzberg. His number is 676-4350, and I've already spoken to him, so he's expecting your call.

Before a cure can be effective, Ed, you must grasp the fact that a logical, rational explanation is, in this case as in all others, the *only* explanation. Remember Sherlock Holmes' dictum, as true in science as in criminology: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable,* must be the truth." To you, old friend, the improbable truth is that you are having a nervous breakdown; rather than face that, you have taken refuge in consoling impossibilities. And do not quote back to me Aristotle's claim that "plausible impossibilities should be preferred to unconvincing possibilities"; I have succinctly demolished that position in my recent book, *Isaac Asimov's Guide to the Wit and Wisdom of All Human History* (Afflatua Press, N.Y., 1976). Of course, whenever they're challenged, the camp followers of irrationality will resort to Hegel's rejoinder when told that the facts contradicted his theories: "All the worse for the facts." Do not join them, Ed. The facts dictate that you seek expert medical advice, and as quickly as possible.

If it will help put your mind at rest, I have examined your pouch, and although I can't identify all the ingredients as yet, they appear thoroughly non-toxic and, believe it or not, non-

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magical. The shells are cowrie and the hair does seem to be human, and of European texture, but that means nothing in and of itself; your meeting the African in the barber shop was obviously nothing more than a coincidence. This little grab-bag of junk can hurt *no one*, Ed. Only you can hurt yourself. I hope I have been of some help in making that clear.

On a lighter note, my latest book, *Isaac Asimov's Guide to Health, Happiness and Regularity through Self-Negation*, is doing very well, and will soon be out in paperback. (So far, it's even outselling my *Isaac Asimov's Guide to Guides.)* At a recent autograph party in Poughkeepsie, several nubile young ladies, obviously enamored of both my charm and talent, inquired if I had a hobby. I replied, with a bow to Oliver St. John Gogarty: "Converting lesbians." Well, I can tell you, Edward, I couldn't get rid of them after that. In fact, later that night....

[Deleted for reasons of taste, and space —The Editor]

...Well, Edward, I must get back to the grindstone, I've got another book to turn out this afternoon. (My first venture into political porn, *Sex Slaves of the Judiciary Committee*, based loosely on Watergate.) Hope you'll soon free yourself of the Black Dog, and we can get together for lunch.

Cordially,
Isaac

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NYC
CANNOT GO ON LIKE THIS STATE YOUR TERMS

EDWARD FERMAN
3240 RIDGEDALE AVE
CORNWALL CONN

329 East 8th Street
New York, N.Y. 10009
September 13, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My dear friend Ed:

I have received your wire and am most sympathetic to your plight, although I cannot countenance the idea that *multi*, or witch-power, is at the root of your difficulties. Nevertheless, inasmuch as your welfare and happiness are so important to me, I have swallowed my doubts and performed certain *uchawi* rituals of cleansing or, in Western parlance, exorcism, that were handed down to me by my uncle, the *Mganga* of our people. If a vindictive *mhondoro* is indeed pursuing you, he is now banished to the Eternal Night from whence he came. Thaumaturgically speaking, however, there is no assurance that he will not re-materialize in the future, if the situation which triggered his initial manifestation should recur. Thus, eternal vigilance

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on my part would be required in order to prevent another psychic onslaught on your mind and body, this time possibly fatal. Needless to say, dear Edward, I cannot intellectually justify your supernatural hypothesis, but I hope my actions will reassure you and soothe your troubled thoughts.

I also trust that following your recuperation you will return to my stories with a fresh and positive perspective. I am currently working on a new piece, THE HELL PITS OF R'GHANNA, which I will dispatch to you shortly. It is of novella length, and should elicit much favorable comment among the cognoscenti.

With warmest fraternal feelings,
Your buddy
Oggy

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
September 20, 1980

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
Dear Oginga:

Yes, the headaches and chest pains have stopped, and I am slowly returning to normal. If anything in my life can ever be normal again. I understand your letter fully. Let us leave it at that.

Enclosed is a check for ASTRID OF THE ASTEROIDS, SLIME SLAVES OF G'HARN and URSULA OF URANUS.

Yours,
Edward L. Ferman

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
October 27, 1980

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
Dear Ed:

Thank you for your check for HELL PITS OF R'GHANNA. I am enclosing a rough sketch of the cover illustration, which you will kindly have your own artist follow explicitly.

Your friend,
Oggy

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
March 23, 1981

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
Dear Oginga:

Enclosed is a check for SELENA OF SIRIUS and SPACE PIRATES OF SATURN. I am sorry the amount is smaller this time, but we have had grave circulation problems from the day we began running your stories. I understand that since the elephant got Ben Bova you have been writing for *Omni* as well. I hope their finances are in better shape than ours.

Would you please provide us with an 8" by 10" glossy photograph of yourself (head and shoulders) for the artist working on the cover of our Oginga Nkabele Special Issue. He needs it as soon as possible.

Yours,
Ed

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P.S. I'm enclosing a list of the members of Science Fiction Writers of America, and most of their addresses. Under separate cover I've sent you a convention folio which has many of the photographs of individual writers you requested. They should be voting on the Nebula Awards in mid-April. I'm afraid I don't know where any of them have their hair cut, but I'm sure you'll find out.

329 East 8th Street
New York, New York 10009
May 10, 1981

Mr. Edward L. Ferman
Magazine of Fantasy &
Science Fiction
Cornwall, Connecticut 06753

My dear Ed:

Thank you for your most gracious telegram of congratulations on my Nebula. I sincerely believe it is the field itself, rather than your humble servant, that is the true beneficiary. Who, precisely, votes on the Hugos at the World Convention? How may I get in touch with them? I am still, alas, regrettably innocent of the inner machinations of American fandom.

With warmest regards,
Your pal
Oggy

Cornwall, Connecticut 06753
January 12, 1982

Mr. O.T. Nkabele
23 Sutton Place
New York, New York 10023

Dear Oggy:

It was good seeing you and Rachel of the weekend. I hope you'll come up again on your return from Hollywood.

No, I don't personally know anyone on the Nobel Prize Committee, but I have visited the Swedish Embassy and they inform me the judges are comprised of members of the Swedish and Norwegian Parliaments. The Embassy is mailing me their names and addresses, and I will forward them to you.

Thank you for sending us VISITATION OF THE VRILL. I'm glad you still find time to think of your old friends at F&SF, particularly now that we've gone mimeo. Let me know what you have in mind for the cover.

Best wishes,
Ed

P.S. Could you send me that hangover recipe you once mentioned? The B-12 shots no longer seem to do the job. I'll be tapering off soon, though. Really.

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Dennis O'Neil's last story here was "The Killing of Mother Corn" (February 1975). Mr. O'Neil has since had stories in Ellery Queen's *and* Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazines, articles in* New York *and* Oui *and has written a TV show (an episode of "Logan's Run"). He is currently an editor at Marvel Comics.*

Wave By

BY

DENNIS O'NEIL

The year before the network finally went into the toilet, the common canard was that the kid wasn't human — hardly an original observation, but when people said it about Quentin, I always had the idea they were using the cliche to state an article of faith.

I once overheard two young women discussing Quentin in the employees' cafeteria. "What's to dislike?" a receptionist asked her companion.

"The same thing there is to like," the second woman replied through a mouthful of chicken salad.

"I see what you mean."

I did, too. That's how most of us network lackeys felt about Quentin: neutral. Some of us, however, thought we should have a more elaborate opinion, preferably accompanied by *schtick*. Hugh Kirk delivered his the night we were celebrating the blessing of our perennial third-spot organization by the Neilsen families. The love for us out there in America was greater than the love for the competition: thus spake Neilsen.

The guys who rode in the limos were celebrating up the block at the *21*, and the peons — newswriters and the like — were bellied up to Clancy's Bar. We middle-echelon troops were crammed into PJ Clarke's, listening to Hugh above the din:

"He's a camera shot, right?" Hugh shouted. "You mess with his vertical hold and —" Hugh began bouncing up and down and jiggling the flesh on his face: a passable and reasonably funny imitation of a television screen gone awry. "You gotta believe somebody turns him on in the morning and turns him off at night. You can't picture him fucking or even taking a piss. He's a character in one of his own sitcoms."

"Not exactly." Quentin was at

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Hugh's elbow as though he had materialized from the smoke and laughter and fumes. As always, Quentin's sallow face was placid, his gray three-piece suit immaculate. He was as jarringly out of place in that crowded, raucous bar as a prayer for nookie would be on "Give Us This Day."

"Quentin," Hugh yelped, forcing a grin and slopping martini on his shirt cuff.

"You can think of me as a pattern of random energy," Quentin said and without waiting for a reply slid between a pair of *zoftig* rumps without touching them, as insubstantial as a mood.

"What the fuck did he mean by that?" Hugh grumbled, trying not to show his upset at being caught bad-mouthing the boss.

"He was telling the simple truth, quantum-physics fans," said Barry Hunter, a science reporter who, we knew, would soon be replaced by a nondrinker. "Y'see, on the most basic level, we are *all* patterns of energy. Nobody knows whether the real stuff is waves or particles, matter or energy. Treat 'em one way, they're waves; treat 'em the other, the sonsabitches are particles. No wonder physicists drink."

"How'd Quentin hear about it? *Mister Wizard?*"

"A special on *Nova.*"

The party lurched on and, at eleven, I elbowed my way onto Third Avenue: the biliousness in my gut and the retinal ache forewarned a gruesome hangover unless I at least partially detoxified myself. I walked cross town, ignoring cabs, hookers and the sad young gays standing in doorways like stage-frightened children; and at Broadway I turned South and, for no sane, rational reason, went into the Fun Palace at Fifty-first, a sleazy, fluorescent-lit haven for weary hustlers, brash Latinos and bewildered tourists which featured a counter selling practical jokes that were venerable in Harding's day — whooppee cushions, joy buzzers, squirting flowers — and several dozen coin-operated games: pinballs, air hockey, the various video gadgets. I wandered among them, fingering a quarter, looking for a minute's pointless amusement. At midnight on Monday, the premises were nearly deserted and the air reeked of Woolworth perfume, hard-used cigarette filters and the kind of sweat that chuckles at Right Guard — by no stretch of my imagination or anyone else's the recreation site of choice for an elegant young media *wunderkind.* Yet there he was playing "Galactic Defender," a game inspired by Quentin's series of the same name — a real mother of a game, real state-of-the-art: you sat in a gimballed pilot's chair three-quarters surrounded by a back-projected "star field"; and when you saw an enemy "ship" being spewed by the video guns behind the screen, you spun, raised or lowered the seat, pressed a firing stud; and mockups of "dis-

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into-beams" shot red light at the target. If they hit, the two-dimensional ships shattered into irregular fragments with a satisfying quadrophonic roar; and, for the final, nifty little touch of sadism, a two-dimensional alien, rather like a malevolent artichoke, tumbled toward you and, when he appeared to be ten feet away, disintegrated. It wasn't a particularly easy game: the "ships" could and did come from any direction, sometimes several simultaneously; and if they shot first, points would be subtracted from the player's score. There were no minuses on Quentin's board. He was magnificent. Swiveled and whirled and scored without missing a beat. No fictional galactic defender was ever better — couldn't be; no story editor would allow suspense to be destroyed by such an infallible hero. Sitting and fighting his imaginary battle, Quentin seemed to become a *part* of the toy, neither more nor less substantial than the alien artichokes. His skin, pale and bluish in the glow from the screen, seemed translucent, almost transparent; his eyes glinted and his face was a mask of total concentration. For fifteen minutes I watched him, as fascinated as I'd once been by the videotape of Emile Griffith killing Benny Paret with punches, as spectators, judges and the referee looked on. Reality and unreality became jumbled in my mind: the Griffith-Paret fight had actually occurred, yet what I'd seen had been magnetic impulses on a strip of Mylar. Quentin's combat with the artichokes, conversely, couldn't really happen, but the genuine me was in the same room with the genuine Quentin as it did. Confused, feeling like a Zen monk who'd discovered Satori made me queasy, I left without speaking to Quentin and hurried to my apartment.

The next day the wrinkled eminence in the corner office on the thirty-ninth floor decreed that Quentin's triumph should be heralded. "Give the kid some ink," he told me. I knew Quentin would not be happy with the publicity, but not even the *wunderkind* can argue with the Chairman of the Board. So I arrived at Quentin's suite at two-thirty sharp bearing minicorder and my least threatening interviewer's smile. I had the essentials, of course, as did every PR man, columnist and TV beat reporter in the country. Age: an incredible 25. Position: vice-president in charge of programming, up from usher to assistant to the Saturday morning programmer in an unbelievable six years. Then to programmer, period. Quentin could handle kiddie and daytime and prime-time all by himself better than the three or four people the other networks required. His annual paycheck exceeded 300K and he was a bargain at the price; he actually *saved* the network money in salaries. And he was a dream to work with: he never demanded perks or recognition, never meddled in office politics. He just programmed. The only department which ever suffered

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from his was mine; he was rotten material for press releases. His father was an ordinary Queens mailman, his mother a housewife. Quentin had been a late baby; his mother was 54 when she had him, and that was the whole of Quentin's distinguishing characteristics. I scanned the transcript of my earlier conversation with the mother and still found nothing usable.

She was a plain, plump woman living in the lower-middle-class housing project where Quentin grew up. She'd met me in a tiny kitchen that smelled of Lysol and pie crust.

"How was Quentin as a child?" I asked.

"A good boy. Quiet. Kept to himself. Watched the television a lot."

"How were his grades?"

She shrugged and raised her brows. "Nobody complained."

"He ever get into any scrapes?"

"Scrapes?"

"Trouble."

"Oh, no. Like I say, he watched television a lot."

"Hobbies?"

"The television, I guess you could say."

"What were his ambitions? Did he want to be a cop, an astronaut?"

"All he talked about was the television programs."

The television. My pretty thorough investigation of Quentin revealed no indulgence in liquor, dope, sports, music, cars, girls, boys or sheep. He was the Compleat Viewer, unstintingly devoted to the flickering of the cathode rays. His single flaw was as a consumer; he absorbed the commercials as he did everything else on the tube, but he displayed no interest in the wares they touted. He accepted the goodies he was given and was satisfied — would have been equally satisfied with either less or more, I'm certain.

I found him in a lounger in front of fifteen color sets, one for each New York channel, plus a New Jersey station and the two cable outlets. The room was otherwise bare and semidark; heavy curtains were drawn on a superb view of Manhattan Island. Quentin was staring at a spot somewhere above the sets, apparently listening to the babble from fifteen speakers, holding a small Japanese tape recorder. I switched on my own machine and asked, "Got a minute, Quentin?"

"Sure." He did not look at me.

"How does it feel to be at the top of the ratings?"

"Fine."

"Any special plans for the coming season?"

"Keep giving the public what it wants."

"Which is?"

"Good entertainment."

"Do you foresee any trends?"

"No."

I felt exasperated. It was like questioning a pocket calculator. I wanted to ask, *Quent, old nipper, do you shit transistors?* Instead, I asked, "What's the secret of your success? What do

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you have the rest of the industry doesn't?"

"No secret. I enjoy television."

He glanced at his watch and lifted his recorder to his lips and spoke into it: "Two-thirty-seven. We're losing 'em. CBS is gaining. Small gain for the Channel Nine movie — Fred and Ginger are always danger in the afternoon. By the way, the guy playing the counterman had a bit in the last *Yancy Derringer*. Where's he been? Good face."

Yancy Derringer. That went off ... fifteen years ago? Twenty?

Here at last, I thought, is the genius at function. This is no creature of flesh and blood. This is a ... yes, Barry Hunter was right. This is a *wave* of tremendous length intersecting all other waves, sensing them, touching them, knowing when they are not reaching their intended destinations. But could a wave recall a bit player on an ancient western? Perhaps a *sentient* wave: I envision Quentin's mom and dad humping in front of the Jack Paar Show and there is a cosmic shift — caused by a sunspot, maybe — and for an instant the electronic Jack replaces dad and squirts a stream of ionic jism into mom's womb....

No, no, my sanity was skewing badly. I owed myself a hasty exit and to hell with the interview.

"You'll be reading about yourself in the newspapers," I promised Quentin from the door.

"I don't read," he replied and I ran.

The bullshit I wrote duly appeared, and soon after it did, Quentin's mentor, the wrinkled eminence, was canceled, to be rerun nevermore. Proxies were proxied, conspiracies conspired, and within a month of the funeral a few desks were cleared out and a few new faces graced the corridors. The jowliest, most forbidding of the new faces occupied the corner office on the thirty-ninth floor, and he was neither Quentin's fan, nor television's. When he'd been shunted into the network from its parent conglomerate, he'd told a bunch of media types at Charley O's, "*Kristin Lavansdatter!* That's *my* idea of entertainment. That's what the television of this country *needs*." History would note that his tenure was brief. For the moment, though, he was boss.

I overheard him at the bar in *21*, reiterating the conventional wisdom. "The punk's not human," he boomed to a circle of acolytes. "Jeez, this Quentin's got no balls. Not ball one, mark my words."

"He's good at his job," an overbourboned acolyte dared to suggest.

The *eminence nouveau* flicked a hand, as though banishing the brotherhood of the ball-less from the eyes of creation. "Hah! He's been lucky. Blind luck. Well, he can't go *on* being lucky. Not at *my* network."

I'm not sure whether he realized he'd just passed sentence on Quentin. He took a quick hit of his drink and mumbled, "He wouldn't have lasted ten seconds in Nam."

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Quentin lasted ten more days as programmer — and, incidentally, as a cohesive organization of particles. In the best tradition of cuckolds and guys about to be axed, Quentin remained ignorant of what was common knowledge from the mail room to the transmitter atop the World Trade Center. The morning of his firing, a terse memo was waiting in my box:

Prepare two releases. First to say Q. has been promoted to director of special projects. Second to say his resignation regretfully accepted etc. For release to usual. Will tell you which to go with at noon.

No signature was necessary. I sat and began typing.

At five to twelve, my phone rang and a familiar voice barked, "The punk's out."

I sighed and handed my secretary the second press release. She'd dupe it and copies would be at the three dailies, the wire services and the important weeklies before their staffs returned from lunch. I could expect to be answering journalists' questions for the rest of the afternoon. So I told her to hold the fort for a half-hour and joined the midday mob on Sixth Avenue. I was buying a hotdog and a Pepsi from a Sabarett cart vendor when I saw Quentin hurrying across the avenue, heading east.

I'm not sure why I followed. I guess I was curious to see if Quentin would be lunching with a broadcast executive, and if he did, which one. It was logical to assume he'd be seeking employment, but he moved away from broadcasting row toward Broadway. Was he seeing someone at an independent station? A packager? A syndicator? An agent? None of the above. He went straight to the Fun Palace and stood patiently until the Galactic Defender was unoccupied. I stifled a laugh. I should have known. Quentin was *angry*, I thought, and, characteristically, he planned to vent his fury on colored blobs of light. He pushed nine quarters into the slot, assuring himself of nine minutes of imaginary combat, and hunched to his task. Enemy craft appeared up, down, left and right; and Quentin reacted, swiveling and shooting with flawless aim and absolutely no hesitation. It was, in its ers.. way, wonderful to watch; Quentir was a *master* at this. Hours of practice, I wondered, or natural talent? Then I noticed his lips were pulled back from his perfect, small teeth in either a grimace or a grin — the only expression I'd ever seen on Quentin — and I heard him muttering. Pinballs were clanging and disco was blaring from a portable radio the size of a mattress and a couple of Puerto Rican girls were loudly discussing 'los hermanos que viven in los yellow Chevvies." So although I'd moved to within inches of him, I couldn't be certain of his words. But I believed, and still believe, I was hearing:

"...Corbett and Jones ... Kirk and Spock ... Adams and Rogers ..."

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A litany of the tube's spacefarers.

"... none of 'em could fuckin' *touch* me...."

His thumb pressed the firing stud and an enemy vessel shattered. An explosion blossomed soundlessly in the void, and an enemy trooper, not a bit ludicrous, drifted near until his body could no longer contain inner pressures and his tissues sundered and globules of his fluids froze and scattered.

"Yeah," Quentin breathed.

The timer on the control board indicated Quentin had thirty seconds left. An enormous alien cruiser appeared directly in front of him and he framed it in his gunsights.

"Get him, kid," I said aloud.

He ignored me. He was talking to himself. "Ungrateful bastards. I save their asses and what do I get? The shaft. Well, let them get along without me, let them try."

He removed his hands from the control sticks, relaxed in the seat and smiled.

"Kid, the cruiser," I shouted, but he did not respond. He was alone in the cramped cabin of the starhunter, grim and resigned. The foe filled the viewscreen and weapons sprouted from its snout.

"My last mission," Quentin said and laughed.

Energy haloed the alien cannon and —

Everyone I questioned agrees there was *something*. A flash of blinding brightness. The accepted explanation is that sunlight glanced off a mirror on the street and was reflected into the shadowy interior of the Fun Palace. But nobody can explain Quentin's disappearance. They interrogated airline, bus, train and car rental personnel; they offered rewards; they searched flophouses and hospital wards and, ultimately, morgues. No Quentin. I didn't tell them, naturally. But I saw him die, saw him sucked through the gap in the hull; and in the instant before the starhunter reverted to being merely a game, I saw him flatten onto the videoscreen and begin to fall and fall and fall. An illusion, of course. He wasn't really falling: he was shrinking, diminishing as the atoms forming him dispersed and whatever subatomic particles remained became patterns of random energy.

Answer to August Acrostic Puzzle

Anne McCaffrey: *Dragonflight*. Foremost in that frightening array was a triangular formation of four great bronze beasts, their wings overlapping in a tremendous criss-cross pattern as they hovered just above the ground. A dragon's length above and beyond them, there ranged a second line, longer, wider, of brown beasts.

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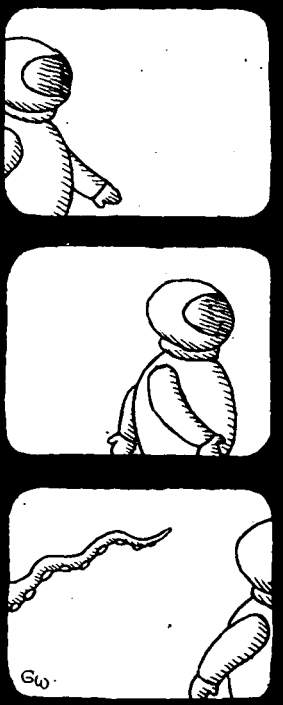
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

I have been heard at times to grumble because reviewing is not all the public thinks it to be, i.e. free movies and sounding off. But I must admit that there are compensations. One such occurred this month when I was able to see *The Empire Strikes Back* almost a month before it officially opened.

The advantage here is not the one-upmanship of being able to say that I've already seen it (though I'm human enough to enjoy that). Nor is it, Lord knows, because this column will see print any earlier (I still missed the last deadline — which was filled anyhow).

No, it's because by seeing it early, I am still able to be surprised by the plot twists and special effects; in other words a lot of blabbermouths haven't spoiled it for me.

Now I don't think that I'm going to be a blabbermouth (or in this case, a blabbertyper) because, for one thing, by the time this *does* see print, everyone in the world including the Ayatollah Khomeini will have seen it; for another, I can think of curiously little to say about *The Empire Strikes Back*. Not, let me hasten to add, because I didn't like it — I loved it — but because it is as beautifully straightforward as *Star Wars*; it, too, gives

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enormous pleasure without being complicated about it, and really doesn't need dissection, explication, or analysis. And considering the enormous amount of wordage written about the first film — at best, useless, at worst, sheer nonsense — one somehow doesn't want to add to it all other again with this one.

However, some random musings might not add that much to the generally redundant carryings-on.

I think a lot of the verbiage will be spent on which of the two films is the better. In point of fact, I think a marvelous job has been done on continuation without replication. It is like trying to decide which is the better of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, *Don't Bite the Sun* and *Drinking Sapphire Wine*, *The King Must Die* and *The Bull From the Sea*.

One thing inevitably lacking in the new film, of course, is that sense of incredulous excitement occasioned by the fact that for the first time you were seeing real science fiction brought to life before your eyes, as happened to so many of us at *Star Wars*. That could only happen once. And there is no scene in *Empire* that distills that feeling, as the *cantina* scene did for me.

On the other hand, there are aspects of *Empire* that are as exciting in other ways. The tour de force of the movie is not any of the big effects, extraordinary though some of them are, but Yoda and the scenes built around him. Come to think of it, this also involves the seeing-something-I'd-only-read-about-before feeling, in this case, a believable alien being that wasn't a human in makeup or a rubber suit. (Much as I love Chewbacca, I never really thought of him as anything but an oversized teddy bear with mechanical ability. But Yoda is something else...)

And in something of the same vein, though on a lesser level, I was immensely impressed with the tauntauns, the bipedal riding beasts. One almost takes the big mechanical marvels for granted these days, but the creation of convincing living beings is still a miracle.

Maybe to avoid bringing down the wrath of the gods on George Lucas, I could mention the one flaw I found in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the one visual effect that didn't work for me. That was the exteriors of the city in the clouds, and I have the feeling that this is less a matter of inferior effect-making than of design, which is pure art deco. Now, art deco is so artificial that it makes reality look fake — I've always suspected that the Chrysler Building is really a painted flat — so for all I know they photographed a city in the clouds and it just came out badly.

A few other thoughts on script and characters. This, of all places, is where tribute should be paid to the late Leigh Brackett, who wrote the original screenplay. The day after I saw *The Empire Strikes Back*, I had occasion to

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go through a bunch of mid-'40s *Planet Stories*, the premiere space opera pulp of its time. Almost every issue featured a story by Brackett, and you can bet that depsite the garish covers and wonderfully awful titles ("The Vanishing Venusians," "Black Amazon of Mars," "Lorelei of the Red Mist" — the last co-authored with Ray Bradbury, of all people), each story was excitingly conceived and skillfully written, with a sensuousness that none of the male writers of the day could match. Much of that Brackett is in the *Empire* script — thank God Hollywood finally saw fit to use her science-fictional talents.

As for Han, Luke, Leia and Co., I find that I know and like them better now (especially Leia, who is a funny, spunky and charming lady), more evidence of continuation rather than replication.

I wonder what the conservative s/f community will make of it? I was amused that they didn't like *2001* because it *wasn't* science fiction ("Mushy metaphysics. Violated the 3 laws of robotics. Etc.") and didn't like *Star Wars* because it *was* ("Trite. Cliched. Old hat. Etc."). As for the general public, well, the one question which everyone asks is, "Is it OK?", i.e. is it a worthy successor to *Star Wars*. When I say yes, they are honestly relieved and happy. An awful lot of people love and care about *Star Wars*, and that, to me, is as wonderful as anything in the movie itself.

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One of science fiction's (and this editor's) favorite themes is after-the-holocaust, a theme which this story shares with Felix Gotschalk's novella. And what a pleasure it is to see both stories strike off in such totally fresh and different directions. This is Edward Hughes first published piece. He lives in Manchester, England with his wife and works in the telecommunication department of a national newspaper.

In The Name of the Father

BY

EDWARD P. HUGHES

Patrick O'Meara lay awake in his castle, thinking of Eileen O'Connor. Down below in Barley Cross, Liam McGrath lay sleepless in his cot, also thinking of Eileen O'Connor. In another cottage in the village, dark-eye Eileen O'Connor, clutching the rag doll she had loved since she was two, slept on in blissful ignorance.

Around five, the younger man, no longer able to suffer inactivity, got up and pushed wide the casement. In the half-light of dawn O'Meara's Fist dominated the skyline. Liam made out the high flak towers floating above serrated battlements. He yawned. Having seen O'Meara's Fist framed in his bedroom window for nineteen years, Liam wearied of the marvel. Besides, like the rest of the villagers, he was privy to its infirmities—the corroded armour, the rusty rocket launchers, and the shellless batteries. And, like most of his village contemporaries, he found it hard to imagine that the great museum piece had ever intimidated any aggressor.

He sniffed the air scented by overnight rain. This, then, was the day. He jumped at the sound of his mother's alarm in the next room, heard the bed creak as she got up. He shivered. Now would begin the long-awaited sequence of events destined to end that evening in the bedroom of the old Curry cottage, with Eileen O'Connor and himself, face to face, alone at last, and irrevocably married.

"Liam! Are you going to lie on all morning?"

He dressed quickly in his working clothes. This was going to be a day when help would have been welcome. His stepfather being on duty at the Fist meant that he and his mother would have to cope with all the household

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chores in addition to preparing for the wedding.

But Eileen had chosen the date purposely: Andy McGrath on duty at the Fist meant a military guard of honor to greet them outside church.

"Liam! Will you lie abed all your wedding day?"

"Coming, Mam." He clattered downstairs, out the back door, and across the yard. First chore was pumping the top cistern full while his mother kindled the fire and cooked breakfast. Afterwards he would milk the cows, feed the pigs, carry in the turf, chop kindling, check his snares, take the mare over to Seamus Murray for shoeing, and smuggle a sucking pig across to Eileen's mother as the McGrath contribution to the wedding feast. With a bit of luck, he might even find time to give his chin an extra close scrape before he put on his Sunday suit for the ceremony.

He pumped, watching the light strengthen through the branches of the overhanging apple tree, slowly exposing the detail of O'Meara's Fist.

He spat pensively into the long grass, wondering what the O'Meara himself was doing at this very moment. Certainly, he would not be pumping water in his old work clothes—wedding day or no. Not that the old lecher had ever needed to marry—when he had merely to lift a finger to get any woman in the village. Liam switched sides on the pump handle, turning his back on O'Meara's Fist. Let the old ram lie on, probably ignorant of the news that this day the only son of Maureen McGrath was marrying the dark-eyed daughter of Tom and Biddy O'Connor. His grip tightened on the pump handle. Few people saw the old goat nowadays. There had been a day when he might have come down from the Fist to awe the reception with his presence. Liam wiped sweat from his forehead, wondering why some folk were born to rule, and others to be ruled. Although there was little sign of the Master's iron hand these days. Indeed, if gossip were true, it was over a year since he had summoned a woman to the Fist.

A spatter of drops from the overflow sprinkled his nape. He released the pump handle, loosed the clamp which attached hose to spout. Any moment now his mother would...

"Breakfast, Liam!"

He soused his head under the spout, then started back to the house, picking up the egg from the side of the byre where the brown hen laid each morning.

Right now, up at the Fist, Andy McGrath would no doubt be dressing the guard into line for inspection by General Desmond. There was a wonder for you. How O'Meara the Ram, self-styled Duke of Connaught, Lord of Barley Cross, Master of the Fist, and lecher supreme, succeded in inspiring the loyalty of people like Andy McGrath and General Desmond, or, for that matter, of people like school-

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mistress Celia Larkin, Kevin Murphy the vet, Doctor Denny Mallon and other decent folk.

Maybe it had something to do with the old days when the O'Meara built his Fist atop Barra Hill, buttressing it with armour from the warship which foundered off Clifden and parking his tank in the driveway to the Fist on the last drop of gas. And there were the legends of his fabulous exploits, like the raid on the pill warehouse in Tuam which, they say, gave Barley Cross aspirin, antibiotics and independence.

Liam sighed. Times were certainly not like that now. Just work, work, and not enough hands to go round.

His mother called. "Quit mooning out there! Come in and eat your breakfast!"

He scraped his boots on the grating at the back door and went in, placing the egg in the crock on the dresser. He said, "Does Andy know the time of the wedding?"

Maureen McGrath frowned. "Liam, I wish you would learn not to call your stepfather 'Andy.' You are not yet a grown man, and it is altogether too familiar. Could you not call him 'Da'—just to please me?"

Liam sat down at the bare, scrubbed table. He mumbled through a mouthful of oatcake. "Andy is not bothered. He said I might call him what I wished, so long as I didn't call him early. He is not my real father, anyway."

"Your own father would have stood for no use of Christian names." His mother's voice shook with unaccustomed emotion. He looked up and caught her eyes sparkling angrily at him. "Flinty was a strict man," she stormed. "He'd have stood no nonsense from you!"

"Leave off, Mam," he pleaded. "Who knows what my Da would have stood for? It's fifteen years since he got that arrow in his lung, fighting for the old ram up there on Barra Hill."

"Liam!" Her voice alarmingly. "I will not have you using words like that about the Master of the Fist."

He raised eyebrows in astonishment. "But, Mam—that's what everyone calls him. They say he's been to bed with nearly every woman in the village." He broke off, and bit his lip in embarrassment.

Maureen McGrath flushed. "Liam McGrath, you have been listening to prurient gossip, and much good will it do you."

"Mam," he said patiently. "I'm only repeating what has been whispered around the village since I was a gossoon. Why, half the kids have the great O'Meara beak."

"Liam!" His mother screeched. "I forbid you to discuss such things in this house. If you have finished eating, I suggest you take the mare on down to Seamus Murray, and after that you give the gig a good wash. If you are going to church in style, let it at least be a clean style."

Liam stuffed the last of the oatcakes

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into his mouth and rose from the table. "I'll do it right now, Mam," he said.

At the door of the smithy, Seamus Murray clapped a hot shoe to the mare's off hind foot clutched firmly between his knees and watched the smoke curl.

"Great day for you, Liam," he said.

"If I can keep my Mam in a good temper it will be," Liam responded. "Why should she get so upset when I criticize the old ram up there?" He nodded at the Fist which loomed plain in the sunlight at the top of the street. "Hasn't the old despot had his way with almost every woman in Barley Cross?"

The blacksmith fished a long, triangular nail from the pocket of his apron, inserted it through a hole in the horseshoe and hammered it home. His voice was almost inaudible. "Easy to be critical, son. The O'Meara has been Lord and Protector here nigh on thirty years. Before he came we were like fowls in a farmyard with the fox outside. But he disciplined us, drilled us, dragged guns half the length of Connemara behind that old tank of his, and made Barley Cross a name in the land." The smith waved towards a black skeleton which lay rusting on the hump of rock in Flanagan's barley acre. "*That* didn't come down by accident. We shot it clean out of the air. They say 'twas the last aeroplane in the West of Ireland. I was there and saw it come down. We did a three-week stretch on duty in those days because the village had to be guarded constantly. Gangs used to come aroving. And, if they thought you had anything worth stealing, by God, they were after you with guns and cudgels and knives. But we stopped 'em in Barley Cross. They learned to leave us alone."

The smith sniffed embarrassedly. In silence he snipped off the sharp end of the nail protruding from the side of the mare's hoof. "There aren't so many people around now to make trouble," he added. "You might even say we no longer need the O'Meara for a protector. But, who can tell?" He straightened up, searching his pocket for a nail. "You might say we were lucky to get through in such good shape. They tell me Clifden is a ghost town, now. 'Tis a great pity. But they didn't have our luck. And sure, 'twas the O'Meara luck, and I, for one, am glad of it. So, if he wants to play medieval monarch, I'm prepared to put up with it."

He hammered home the nail, snipped off the point, and released the mare's leg. Liam followed him into the smithy. He watched the smith work the bellows before pushing another shoe into the glowing coals. "But, Seamus, what if it was your own wife?"

Seamus Murray turned to stare at him, his gaze level and placid. "After twenty-eight years of marriage to me, Mary is not the lass to drive the O'Meara crazy with desire. Let's say the idea doesn't trouble me."

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"But when you were younger?"

The smith hooked the shoe from the coals. He spat expertly. Spittle ricocheted from the hot iron. Satisfied, he gripped the shoe with the tongs and carried it out to the waiting mare. "Let's say," he said slowly, "if anything happened, I wasn't aware of it. And, if it did, somehow Mary neglected to mention the matter."

His eyelids crinkled as he watched the hot iron bed itself into the mare's hoof. He glanced slyly at Liam. "I suppose 'tis your wedding this afternoon that has set you thinking these serious thoughts?"

Liam scowled. He cocked an eye at the menacing Fist and drew patterns with his toe in the dirt. He set his jaw. "Nothing happens to Eileen without my say-so."

Seamus Murray smiled sourly. He began to nail on the cooling shoe. "Brave words, son. But what would you gain by standing between the Master and a woman's virginity? He could deal with you, and *then* take what he wanted."

Liam felt his resolution wavering before Murray's calm acceptance of the Master's authority. He said, "Surely the O'Meara wouldn't treat a new bride that way?"

The smith was grinning openly. "Haven't you just suggested that he treated my Mary so?" He stared quizzically at Liam for a moment, then bent back over the hoof. He rasped the clipped nail points smooth without looking up. "I shouldn't worry overmuch, son. Probably the Master is not even aware that you are to be marrid today."

He gave the hoof a final buff, then released the beast. He pushed her towards Liam with a pat on the rump. "She'll do for a while now, Liam. Tell your Mam that's the last of my good shoes. I'll be making them from scrap in future, unless a tinker happens by with some."

Liam took the mare's bridle. "Let me know when you're ready for the piglet. I'll bring it straight over. Then we'll be quits for the last two jobs."

The smith patted his shoulder. "Don't be worrying about that either, son. I'll let Andy know when we are ready for it."

Liam slid onto the mare's back. He turned her head towards home. God Damn! These old 'uns wouldn't let you grow up. Leave it to Andy. He will settle it. Let the O'Meara have his way, he saved our lives in the past. Well, he hadn't saved Liam McGrath's life, and Liam McGrath owed him nothing. They could run the village any way they liked, but don't expect Liam McGrath to get down and bow to their pet tyrant.

His stepfather was waiting outside the front door when he got home. Andy McGrath wore his visored helmet and beribboned flak jacket. Wizened Willie Flanagan and poor Eamon Toomey stood behind him. All three carried FN rifles. Liam opened his

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mouth to suggest that three men were not much of a guard of honor, saw the look on his stepfather's face, and thought the better of it. He cartwheeled dextrously from the mare's back. "Hi, Andy! You're early. The wedding's not until two."

Andy McGrath's face was grim. "We'll be in time, Laim, never doubt. But first we've a little business with you." He fumbled inside his jacket and brought out a folded sheet of paper. Pushing up his visor, he put on his spectacles, and unfolded the paper. "Just so you understand, Liam, that I am carrying out orders." He cleared his throat and began to read.

"From the Lord of Barley Cross to Liam McGrath of Killoo Farm. Take note that we intend to exercise our droit du seigneur with your intended wife Eileen O'Connor and that Sergeant McGrath has orders to escort her to the Fist at six of the clock this day."

Liam felt his face grow hot. "Droit...droit what?"

His stepfather's face was impassive. "Droit du seigneur, lad. It's old French. Sometimes it's called *Jus primae noctis*— which is Latin for the same thing—the right of the first night. The Master intends to exercise his legal rights with your betrothed."

Liam felt the color drain from his face. A lump of ice congealed in his chest. He stammered. "The...the Master can't want my Eileen!"

Andy McGrath refolded the paper, then tucked it inside his jacket. He removed his spectacles and put them into a pocket. "The Master can, and the Master does."

Liam caught his stepfather's hand in sudden appeal. "But you won't let them take her away!"

Andy McGrath's gaze softened slightly. "I'm sorry, lad. I'm the one that must do the taking."

Liam clutched him. "Andy, you can't!"

His stepfather firmly removed Liam's hand. "I must warn you, son, that it is a serious offence to obstruct the Master's officers in the execution of their duty. So don't try anything foolish. You'll get your Eileen back in the morning. She won't be the first, nor will she be the last. Now I suggest you accept that your married life starts tomorrow instead of tonight. And I'll be on my way to break the news to the O'Connors."

Liam stared incredulously at his stepfather and the two-man squad awkwardly clutching their rifles. Each those guns, by repute, held only one round because of the miserly way General Desmond released ammunition. But one bullet could settle an argument. Would they really shoot him if he tried to prevent their abduction of Eileen? In the leg, perhaps, as a warning. Willie Flanagan was a poacher by vocation; no doubt he would prefer a noose, or the knife. But poor Eamon Toomey would do whatever he was told: he would shoot, and think afterwards.

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Hot, burning tears were suddenly scalding his cheeks.

His stepfather put an arm around his shoulders. He urged him towards the doorway of the house. "Go in and talk to your mother, son. She'll listen to you. And she will tell you that what I say is the best thing to do."

He turned to Willie and Eamonn. "Right, lads. To the O'Connors now, and we'll get it over with."

Eileen O'Connor open the back door and gasped. "Liam! You know it's unlucky to be seeing me before the service!"

He tried to take her into his arms, but she held him off.

"I had to come," he panted. "My Mam thinks I'm checking the snares. Has Andy been yet?"

She glanced quickly over her shoulder into the interior of the house. "You know he has. He came straight from your place."

He gripped her arms. "Do you know why he came?"

She nodded, lowering her eyes.

"Then why don't you say something?" Surely she could not remain calm, knowing the message Andy McGrath had brought. He said, "You won't let that old—?"

Eileen O'Connor drew in a deep breath. She looked him straight in the eyes. "My Da says it's the law and that we must do as the law says. He says we should regard it as an honor."

He snorted bitterly. "Your Da sounds like a first-class creep to me."

She glared at him. "Don't you be calling my Da a creep. He did his share for Barley Cross before you were born. And you're not even old enough to stand guard at the Fist yet?"

He pulled her towards him and again tried to embrace her. "Don't let's quarrel, Eileen. I'm not calling your Da names. It's just that he is like our Andy. All the old folk act the same—as though O'Meara was God, and his slightest wish the law."

She stood cold and motionless in his arms. "My Da says without the Master there would be no law."

He swallowed an angry retort and said patiently, "We'll have to get away before Andy comes."

He felt her stiffen. "Why? Why should we go away?"

"Why? So that old lecher can't...."

"He's not so old, and he's not a lecher. They say he is a very civil man."

"Civil! My God!"

She drew back as far as his arms would permit. Her voice was like ice on a pool. "If I've said something foolish, Liam McGrath, please don't hesitate to point it out."

His hands trembled with the impulse to crush her to him, knowing that she would resist. He said, "Eileen, let's not quarrel over this. Do you want the O'Meara to take you up there, and...." He floundered helplessly, left the question hanging.

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Her lips compressed into a thin, straight line, which warned him that O'Connor common sense would now prevail. "If I agreed to go with you, where would we go?"

"Why—somewhere outside the village. There's the O'Toole cabin on Kirkogue has been empty this twelve-month."

"Because no one has wanted it since old Gabriel died there, all alone, without a soul to help him, and at the mercy of any rogue that passed that way. Who would be caring for me while you were down here working at your farm?"

"But, Eileen—I'd stay with you. I wouldn't leave you on your own. We'd start a new farm. Old Gabriel had quite a bit of pasture at the back."

Her mouth turned down at the corners. "Faith—there isn't enough soil up there to grow a week's potatoes. And the land sloping so bad you'd need a short leg to get around easy."

"Then we'll build a cottage nearer the village. There's plenty of stone, and I'm good with my hands."

She sighed, wagging her head in mock despair. "Liam McGrath, sometimes I think you are a great booby. How near the village would you build your cottage? Near enough, I hope, for O'Meara's law to protect us from vagabonds like the two your Andy hanged last month. But if you seek the law's protection, don't you have to obey it, too? And the law says I go up to the Fist tonight."

She let him pull her towards him then, felt his tears wet her cheek. She stroked the back of his head. "It's not the end of the world, lad. If we lived outside Barley Cross I'd probably have been raped at twelve, and dying from malnutrition by now. We have a good life here. No bad men. And there's Doctor Denny's hospital if you're sick. I don't want to live anywhere else. So, we take the rough with the smooth. And, if I do have to go up to the Fist, nobody outside our families need even know. And I'm sure you'd rather I went willingly, than be dragged there, kicking and screaming over something any girl outside Barley Cross would regard as a normal event, and in this specific case might even consider it an honor."

He crushed her to him, not listening, unwilling to dispute further. "Don't worry," he murmured into her hair. "I'll fix it, somehow."

She pushed back his head so that she could look into his eyes. "Liam McGrath, there'll be no fixing, somehow or anyhow! We are going to live here in Barley Cross after we are wed, and you'll do nothing to prevent it!"

"But Eileen—" he began.

"But nothing." She closed his lips with her own. "If I can put up with it, so can you. Now off you go before my Mam comes to see who it is that I'm blathering with at the back door."

Mind churning, Laim stumbled blindly from the O'Connor's yard. Sunlight flashed on jewels under his

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eyelids. help from someone more powerful than himself was what he needed. He lurched towards the street.

Molly Larkin filled the doorway of her father's neat cottage beside the schoolhouse. Her arms were white to the elbows with flour. She stared at him in surprise. "Why, Liam—I thought today was your—?"

"It is, Molly, it is." He felt himself coloring with embarrassment. Once upon a time he had fancied motherless Molly Larkin. No doubt she would make someone a fine wife—if that someone didn't mind marrying her old man as well. He said, "It's your aunt I wanted." She dusted flour from her hands, wiped them on her apron. "She's not home, Liam. I believe she's up at the Fist. Would you be leaving a message?"

He backed away. There was no message he would choose prosy Molly Larkin to deliver for him. "Ah—no, thank you, Molly. 'Tisn't anything important." Granite chippings crunched underfoot; the gate squealed as he closed it behind him.

Who else to try?

Tessie Mallon was snipping dead rose heads in her garden. She was as plump and jolly as her husband was shriveled and sour. She slipped scissors into her apron pocket and pulled off her home-made gloves as Liam hesitated the other side of her hedge. She saw his face and showed alarm.

"The doctor is not in, Liam. Is it your Mam?"

He shook his head dumbly.

"Yourself, then?"

He found his voice. "There is nobody ill, Mrs. Mallon. I just wanted a quick word with the doctor."

She nibbled thoughtfully at the tip of her index finger—a habit that, forty years ago, had driven the village lads crazy. "He said he'd be back in an hour or so. Should I ask him to call round at your house?"

Emotion choked his voice. "No—no, thank you. I'll catch him another time."

She held her head on one side, half smiling. "Your Eileen has already had a chat with him, if that is any help. You don't have to worry about anything."

Liam fled.

Clouds were gathering over Carn Seefin and Leckavrea. Rain would soon be pocking the surface of Lough Corrib. Endless Connemara rain. A wet afternoon for the wedding, for sure. Who else could he try? Father Con?

The old priest led him into a furniture-filled study which had not altered in fifty years, except that now the electric light no longer worked. He listened in silence to Liam's plea for help.

"Well, Liam," he said gently. "What would you have me do? Forbid the wedding?"

"Ah, no, father." That was not the solution that Liam sought.

"What then, son? I'm too old to be trudging up Barra Hill with a shilelagh

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in my hand to knock piety into the O'Meara."

"But, father, you can't condone what he's trying to do. Isn't adultery a sin for him, as well as the rest of us?"

The old priest raised his hands in gentle reproof. "Now, Liam, I did not say that I condoned the O'Meara's actions. No doubt he is as much a sinner as the rest of us."

"Well—couldn't you excommunicate him, or something?"

Father Constantine smiled patiently.

"Excommunication is the Holy Father's business, son, and I haven't had word from His Holiness for many a long year."

Liam's lower lip protruded stubbornly. "You could at lease refuse him the sacraments."

Father Con frowned. His eyes narrowed in unspoken rebuke. He said, "Liam, the church is for sinners. If the O'Meara is our biggest sinner, he must have the biggest need of it."

Liam got to his feet. "Then you can't do anything for me?"

The priest washed his hands in agitation. "My son, although it is no business of yours, because of your involvement I will tell you that I have spoken my mind frequently and forcibly to the Lord of Barley Cross. And I will tell you that, in his own eyes, his deeds are justified. Beyond that I will not go. If you are still unsatisfied, I can only recommend that you seek an interview with the O'Meara himself."

Liam shambled from the grey stone presbytery, anger mounting inside him. His resolve grew firm. No one was willing to help him defy the tyrant. The O'Meara had ruled for so long they were inured to his tyranny. He would follow Father Con's advice. An interview—on different lines to those the priest envisaged!

Liam McGrath turned his steps towards Barra Hill. In the old, dangerous days, tradition had it, the Fist had been used as a sanctuary when the village was attacked. Certainly he remembered spending days in the castle as a child, playing in its grounds in summer. And he knew a way to get up there unobserved....

In the great dining hall of O'Meara's Fist, the Lord of Barley Cross caroused with his henchmen.

The O'Meara himself slumped in a frayed armchair before a smouldering turf fire, a glass of poteen on the bare boards beside him. In a chair across the hearth, Denny Mallon, M.D., hunched like a shriveled embryo, clutching his glass tightly. Kevin Murphy, the vet, and General Larry Desmond shared a broken-backed settee and a half bottle. On a stool on the pegged rug, knees skirt-covered and primly closed, hunched beneath her chin, Celia Larkin, M.A., sipped a cup of herb tea brewed specially for her.

The schoolmistress put down the teacup carefully onto the saucer on the rug. "Did you have any trouble with young McGrath, Larry?"

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General Desmond eased a leg over the end of the sofa. He stared reflectively into his glass. "Ah, no, Celia. Andy McGrath is a good man. He'd march off a cliff edge if I so ordered. I gave him the job of breaking the news. And Tom O'Connor's a biddable man. We'll have no trouble with either of them."

Dr. Denny Mallon stirred in the depths of the old chair. "How did the women take it? I think it's getting harder for them to accept when it hits their own kids."

The general snorted with laughter. "Bedam—I believe they are both dead keen on it. Don't they both want a grandchild to cosset? And do you think that either of them is fussy how it is managed?"

"How about the youngsters?" persisted the schoolmistress. "Are they accepting it?"

The general looked less comfortable. "Andy tells me the lad was upset. He sent him in to talk to his mother. The girl is level-headed. She will do as Tom and Brigit tell her."

"Do you think the Master should attend the reception?"

"Ah, no. Let's keep his ugly mug out of it for as long as possible." The general grinned placatingly at the O'Meara. "I've sent down the usual gift." He swirled the colorless fluid gently in his glass. "It's amazing the influence a bar of real, old-fashioned toilet soap has on the opinion of a nice woman. I reckon we can celebrate another eighty or ninety nuptials before we get down to the carbolic."

The O'Meara opened his eyes. He said plaintively, "Do you ever get the feeling you're invisible? All very fine for you schemers—but it's me is the fall guy." He turned to the schoolmistress. "Do I have to go through with it? After all, the lad may be...."

Celia Larkin interrupted him incisively. "Let be, Pat. We get this from you every time there's a wedding. And it won't make a damned bit of difference. You'll do it if we have to hold you down."

The Master of the Fist leaned forward to pack a fresh turf at the back of the fire. "One day I'm going to disappoint you all. Ask Denny. I've been getting these pains in my chest. 'Twouldn't surprise me, if, one time...."

Denny Mallon waved a dismissive glass. "Whisht, Pat! I'll give you a couple of pills. The exercise will do you good."

"If only you knew," sighed the O'Meara, "what I have to put up with. Coaxing them, turning my back, apologizing, listening to them cry themselves to sleep...."

Patrick O'Meara, ex-Grenadier Guardsman, had altered in the years since his strategic retreat in a stolen Chieftain tank from the burning docks of Belfast to a more defensible position in his native Connemara. Now, discipline sat heavy on his shoulders.

"Maybe I was wrong," he groaned.

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"Maybe we should have gone underground."

Big Larry Desmond tilted the bottle recklessly above his glass. "If the Lord had intended us to live in burrows, He'd have given us long ears and little furry tails."

"Maybe we should have stuck to the cities?"

"*Niet!*" said Kevin Murphy, who had read Marx in his youth. "The Kelly boy took two pigs down to Galway Town last week and came back witless. The dead are lying in the street there, he tells me."

"You can criticize Galway Town," protested the O'Meara, "but we don't make progress."

Celia Larkin straightened her back. "What do you expect? No one is going to invent a turf-driven aeroplane. Nor produce vacuum cleaners from cow pats. But we have twenty-four children attending school. And, if you think you can claim all the credit, you can think again. That Kelly boy was never a ten-month child. He's their own, I'm sure."

"Then why don't they produce more children?"

She looked shocked. "It isn't for us to be prying into private matters! We interfere enough by insisting on your droit du seigneur." She turned to the general. "Please give that Kelly boy an escort if he has to go outside the village in future." She sighed. "God forgive me—one could almost wish he'd grow up promiscuous."

Kevin Murphy rumbled indistinctly. "Nothing wrong with that idea."

She shook her head sadly. "Kevin, your farmyard solutions won't do for us. Children are entitled to their own parents, just as parents are entitled to their own children." She removed her rimless spectacles and polished them on the hem of her sleeve. "Remember the ecology freaks? Predicting what we would run out of—oil, coal, gas, living room, fresh air. Never thought we'd run out of people."

Denny Mallon exhaled clouds of smoke. "I thought the dark-skinned races might have done better. But their crops are letting them down. Something to do with radiation affecting bacteria and viruses, which in turn affects the plants. I caught a broadcast from Athlone years ago—when we had the radio," he added apologetically.

Celia Larkin's lips tightened. "If it *is* the ultraviolet. If those clever professors were so sure, why wasn't something done when they first discovered what was happening?"

Denny Mallon sucked imperturbably on his pipe. "The ozone layer never stopped *all* the ultraviolet. Can anyone know how much radiation it takes to cripple a gene?"

Kevin Murphy scratched his scalp. "Sure— 'tis a statistical thing. Genes are getting hit by radiation all the time. Suddenly, for some reason, the percentage of hits tips the scale from acceptibility to calamity."

General Desmond reached again

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for the bottle. "Statistics be damned—it's our cloudy Connemara skies that I'm grateful for."

Kevin Murphy accepted the bottle from the General. He said, "The beasts seem to hold their own. Maybe it *is* Larry's clouds, or maybe they are not as sensitive as us. But we're getting enough births to keep the herds and flocks going." He grinned at the Lord of Barley Cross. "Be grateful I don't need your services in *my* department."

Celia Larkin frowned. "That's enough of your lewd talk, Kevin. If we can hold on long enough, Barley Cross might start producing radiation-resistant kids. Or the ozone layer might yet repair itself." The shriveled, childless spinster pulled out a frayed handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. Sunlight glinted on her spectacles as she raised her head. "But, in any God-damned case, I can go to my grave hoping that, in the years to come, if there is the faintest chance of things getting going again, we simpletons of Barley Cross will have done our bit to supply a few of the hands and heads that will be needed to get this poor, sorrowing planet progressing again."

There was silence for a moment.

Then General Desmond put down his glass and said, "Amen to that."

"Amen," mumbled veterinary surgeon Kevin Murphy, scowling at no one in particular.

"Amen," whispered Denny Mallon, M.D., staring into the empty bowl of his pipe.

The Lord of Barley Cross got to his feet. He consulted the old wind-up watch he had used since batteries ran out. "Well, madame and gentlemen, if anything is going to happen, it must be soon. There is only an hour to the wedding. If you will excuse me, I'd better be getting a bath and a shave. Can't let the future Mrs. McGrath see me in this state." He jerked a thumb at the servant's door. "Shout for Michael if you want another bottle."

"*You* shout, if you want us," said the general.

The Lord of Barley Cross pushed stockinged feet into slippers and shuffled towards the door. He paused to stare sourly at his henchmen. "If only I hadn't promised Celia thirty years ago—" He sighed. "You'll be flogging O'Meara along until he drops, I suppose?"

The doctor's eyes gleamed puckishly. "We might let you off the hook when you're eighty."

A metal arm on the wall moved from the vertical to the horizontal, causing a bell to tinkle. The general reached out and reset it.

"There's your signal, Pat."

The O'Meara shrugged. "I'll be off then to face the music."

He opened the door of his bedroom and went in. An arm encircled his neck, another his chest. The tip of a knife pricked his shirt front.

"Easy now, son," he grunted, tugging at both arms, striving to maintain his balance.

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"You have until I count ten to promise not to touch Eileen O'Connor tonight," whispered a voice in his ear. "And no noise, or you'll get a blade in your lung like my Da did."

"Your Da? Is it you, Liam?"

"Don't waste time. I'm counting."

The two men swayed silently as the O'Meara tried to free himself from Liam's clutch. The Master of the Fist panted, "If I raise my voice, son, you're dead."

The arm about his neck tensed. A voice sobbed in his ear. "Not before me, old ram. Shout if you want."

The O'Meara's voice was hoarse. "And if I promise?"

Liam's grip relaxed slightly. "I'll let you live."

"I promise."

Liam released him and they stood panting. Then the Master of the Fist shuffled over to the bed and sat down on the coverlet. He waved towards a chair.

"Sit down a moment."

Liam tucked the knife into its sheath. He moved warily across the room, amazed at the ease with which he had achieved his object.

The O'Meara dabbed his face and neck with a grubby pillow. "I wondered if you'd show up." He unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a fine mesh of chain mail beneath. "I put on my wedding garment, just in case." The O'Meara ran a palm over the links. "Picked it up years ago at a fine house in Westport. It has been useful." He rubbed his neck wryly. "You have a stronger left arm than I anticipated."

Liam's mouth sagged open. "You expected me?"

The O'Meara reached over to his bedside table, opened a drawer, and got out a large revolver. He pointed the gun at Liam and closed the drawer with his free hand.

"Now, son," he said. "The tables are turned. Never rely on a promise extracted under duress."

Liam stirred, silent with shock, hands gripping the sides of the chair.

"I shouldn't budge if I were you," the O'Meara cautioned. "Not without first getting my permission." He turned the chamber with his thumb. "This thing is fully loaded. Not like the guards' rifles. That's policy, in case you manage to steal one. It limits the number of pot shots you can take at me."

Liam found his voice. "Why did you expect me?"

The O'Meara tugged his shirt from his trousers. "Oh—I don't make much of a target from down there. Most bridegrooms elect for a personal call. And, since you all know the secret path through the spinney, I leave my window catch off. As good as a carrot, and it saves a deal of reglazing."

He laid the gun carefully on the coverlet. "You'll excuse me undressing," he said. "I've got to take a bath and a shave." He used both hands to pull off his shirt, then bent down to remove his slippers and socks.

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"If you think you can beat me to it—go ahead," he invited. "But I warn you, I don't need to count up to ten before I kill a man. And, no matter who gets who, the sound of a shot will bring those fellers out there running. If that happens, the man to watch is Larry Desmond—he's a killer."

Liam felt the moisture filling his eyes. "You—you *bastard!*"

"Ah, no!" The O'Meara seemed genuinely surprised. "It's you that is the bastard."

Liam blinked furiously. "Don't call me a bastard. I'm not planning to sleep with *your* wife."

The O'Meara tossed his socks into a corner. He picked up the gun and clicked the chamber round thoughtfully.

"I have no wife with whom you might sleep, Liam. And a bastard is precisely what you are. Your mother was not married to your father."

Liam quivered, as though an electric current galvanized his limbs. "Put away the gun, and I'll show you how I feel about *that* statement."

The O'Meara laughed. "Liam—poor old Flinty Hagan couldn't have fathered you. He lost the necessary equipment in a raid on Oughterard a year before he was married. We all kept quiet about it because he was a sensitive man, and we thought a great deal of him."

Liam's lips trembled. The old goat was trying to provoke him, but he wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper. He said, "Then why did my mother agree to marry Flinty?"

The O'Meara sat silent for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"Well now, Liam. We seem to have arrived at what you might call the moment of truth. You have asked me a question which I would rather not answer. If you insist on an answer, I'm afraid we must escalate our discussion to a more formal level."

Liam let his lip curl scornfully. "Dont fence with me. Let's have a straight word out of you."

The O'Meara nodded in agreement. "So be it, son. Up to this moment you could have walked out of this room any time you wanted, and no hard feelings on my part. Now, as I warned you, you've promoted our chat to a really serious plane—that is, namely, *your examination for citizenship.* Some lads never learn about this test. Others, quite naturally, avoid it. But you have headed straight for it. So, now, I'm going to answer your question. And also provide you with some additional information that you haven't asked for. Your response, after due consideration, will govern whether you leave this room vertically or horizontally—and remember *I* am the judge.

"Here goes. Your Mam married Flinty Hagan because Barley Cross needed children, and at the time Flinty was the only available bachelor."

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"But you said Flinty couldn't...."

"Don't interrupt, son, or I might make a hasty decision. Just listen. Very few men in Barley Cross can father a child. The reason goes back a long way, and it isn't their fault. Responsible adults in the village are aware of this and have accepted the solution the people out there in my dining room thought up. The solution is that *I*—because I'm a freak, being fertile—*I* father most of the children in Barley Cross, but their legal fathers get the credit.

"That, briefly, is how our village has managed to remain a living, functioning community, with enough people to do all the work required to keep it going. Now, Liam, if you wish to graduate into a citizen of Barley Cross, you must accept our solution, *and* keep quiet about it. That doesn't mean you can't talk it over with your Eileen. But it does mean you don't discuss it in front of the children. Because the way a child grows up governs how he or she acts when they are adult. And we want the children of Barley Cross to believe that the world is a sane and happy place where everyone gets his own Daddy and Mammy. And we hope that the child will be able to adjust to our madhouse when he is old enough to understand it. It also means that you don't gab about it in the village or do anything which might inadvertently destroy the illusion we have built up so painstakingly. And it means that your Eileen comes up here tonight, like every bride in the last thirty years."

The O'Meara paused, rubbing his jaw reflectively. "Those are the facts. Don't go shouting for help. No one is going to rush in to save you from the crazy O'Meara. Those gentlemen outside have an idea that you might be in here. And they realize that I am making a reasonable attempt to dispel any objections you may hold to the way the village is run. What they do not know, are my methods of persuasion. But it has all happened before, and they have confidence in me."

The O'Meara straightened his back. He raised his arm. The gun pointed at Liam's breastbone.

"You may have qualms about accepting our solution. Your views on putative incest, for instance, may not correspond with ours. The subject is not open for debate. You may walk from this room a responsible adult, or you may be carried out a dead juvenile. Now, sir—how do you say?"

Liam's eyes had been growing wider and wider. "But, if Flinty Hagan wasn't my father—?"

"Keep going," urged the O'Meara. "You are getting warm."

Liam McGrath fingered his own hooked nose, as if he had just become aware of it. He eyed the similar protuberance on the face of the elderly man sitting barefoot and shirtless on the bed. Suddenly he grinned.

"Put up the gun, Da, or you'll have me late. A citizen ought to be on time for his own wedding."

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Messrs Malzberg and Carpenter (a 19-year-old freshman at the University of Redlands in California) offer a short and mordant tale about the reacclimation of a spacer. And you thought things were tough out there...

Getting Back

BY
JEFFREY W. CARPENTER and BARRY N. MALZBERG

"Ken," Bev Gallgher said, "he's due here any minute. What did you say his name was?"

Ken Gallgher was watching Speedo on the set. He said nothing.

"Ken!"

"Huh?"

"What did you say his *name* was?"

"Spo," Ken said. "Something like that."

"Spo?"

"Yeah. I know that sounds strange but that's the name they gave him. They all have funny names."

"He hasn't bothered changing it back, then."

"Not yet," Ken said.

"It's weird how they sometimes don't."

"Don't do what, Bev?"

"Don't change their names. Keep their space names, I mean. Why are we always stuck with breaking in the new ones?"

"Beats me."

"Turn off that set, will you?"

Ken turned up the volume.

"I *hate* Speedo," Bev said.

Spo, meanwhile, sat apprehensively in the rear of the taxi as it inched its way through midtown congestion toward the Gallgher's. He was hot and tired and still thinking of the brotherhood of space. They had been much kinder to one another in the orbiting station, but then circumstances had been different there. Home was different. The rhythms were different. A car cut in front of the cab, and Spo pitched into the seatback as the driver slammed on the brakes.

The driver swore. "Ain't got no *right*," he said. He wrenched the taxi left, swerved into the next lane and pulled alongside the other car, thrusting his middle finger at the old woman driving.

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Spo was awed. The driver's rage had genuine authority. He held up his own middle finger and inspected it; a cyclist to the right pulling alongside, returned the gesture, shouting. Spo looked at the cyclist, then again at the finger, then sat on it.

I've got to get reacclimated, he thought.

"Ken?" Bev Gallgher said, "what was it like in the space station?" The Speedo game was on lag; visuals splashed noiselessly.

"Nice," Ken said. "It was nice."

"How was it nice?"

Ken shrugged. "Don't know," he said. "They were nice to each other, that's all." He paused. "Maybe *too* nice, you know what I mean? A year in orbit up there, locked away."

"He'd better not give us any trouble," Bev said.

The Speedo came back to volume. "Why should there be any trouble?" Ken said. He was puzzled.

"A pardon," Spo said to the driver, "how long will it be before we arrive?"

"I'm going as fast as I can."

"But how *long* will it be? That is all I asked."

"You want trouble, clown?" the driver said with sudden viciousness, "I'll give you trouble."

Another car slid ahead, cutting them off. The driver screamed. Spo closed his eyes, shuddering, and thought of the brotherhood of the mindless night, five thousand miles distant. Well, that was all over now.

"Ken," Bev said, turning from the window. "I think he's here."

Ken looked up, shook his head. The Hammers were too far behind anyway. He cut down the volume and went to the window. A plump, scared little man came out of the cab. Funny, Ken thought, he didn't look like a spacer. But then they weren't supposed to, were they? The little man staggered on the pavement. The driver came out of the cab.

Ken had picked up lipreading from watching Speedo; he could see what they were saying. "That's fifteen dollars, friend," the cab driver had said. "Don't give me any of that away-too-long stuff; you know what's going on."

The small man reached into a pocket of an ill-fitting jacket, took out a white envelope. "He must be paying the driver off now," Ken said.

"Why don't you help him?"

"Handle it *himself*," Ken said savagely. "Those were the orders."

They watched the driver snatch away the envelope, take out all the contents and then walk back into the cab, smiling. The little man stood patiently. The cab went away. Overpaid, obviously, Ken thought. They were all the same. Unless they were reacclimated quickly, this kind of thing would just go on and on. Do the *job*, he thought. Got to do the job.

"He's really new, isn't he?" Bev

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said. "To this, I mean."

"He's been away for three years, Bev."

"He looks scared," Bev said. She giggled.

Ken giggled too. They watched while Spo stood before the house, indecisive.

"That's cute," Bev said. "He's even afraid to come in. We ought to go out and help him." She took Ken's arm almost jauntily and led him toward the door. Funny how close we are at this moment, Ken thought. The two of them against the man from the space station. That was ridiculous, of course. They weren't against anything.

And Spo was no threat. In the station it was like one big happy family. They all took care of one another and so on. To Ken it sounded awful.

"Hello, Spo," he said on the porch.

Spo trembled. He looked terrified.

"Come on," Ken said gently. "We'll watch Speedo." He motioned toward the door with his hand. Start gentle, that was the way you did it. Later on, after you had their trust, that was the time to get rough. "Don't be afraid," he said.

Spo looked at them with luminous eyes. "It's okay, Spo," Bev said. "Isn't he cute? Come here. Here, Spo."

"He's not a dog," Ken said. Bev glared at him. "Well," he said mildly, "I mean he *isn't*. Is he?"

"Spo," Bev said, "don't be nervous. You're welcome here."

This is going to be really hard, Ken thought. Worse than most of them. If it takes this much to get him now into the *house* —

Spo took a few hesitant steps toward them. Ken smiled at him warmly. "Come in," he said. He took Spo's cold hand and, holding on, dragged him into the house. "How was it up there in orbit?" he said heartily. Spo did not reply.

It would be bad all right. Usually they had changed their names anyway on return. Spo didn't even want to give up his space handle.

Spo looked around the room, fascinated by myriad knobs, dials, switches and cord. There is real order here too, he thought. Just like above. Everything has a place which is tied into everything else.

"Boxing to four," the announcer was saying. "Klein is down and bleeding profusely. He's moving oddly on the boards; it looks like a spinal injury up here. That will set them back a little."

"He *is* cute," he heard the woman say.

"Shut up, Bev. They're not supposed to be cute any more. You're making it even harder."

"Klein is in real pain," the announcer said.

"Sit down, Spo," the man said.

"I don't want to be in real pain," he said.

Ken said, "Just relax. You're back

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home now and we'll make you comfortable. Have a seat on the couch and we'll get you some coffee. You still drink coffee, don't you?"

"I don't want real pain!"

Oh, my, Ken thought. He knew what to do, anyway. He took Spo firmly by the collar and pushed him onto the couch. Spo sat in a terrified lump, heaving. Bev stared at him admiringly.

"Spo," Ken said, "you're home now. You've got to readapt to our ways. You have no alternative; those gamma rays or whatever would kill you if you stayed up there. You can't live in space any more, you have to come back here." He paused, looking for a reaction. But Spo said nothing.

"Bev and I are your friends," Ken said reasonably. "We're here to help you."

"We'll help in any way we can," Bev said. "That's what we're here for. To help you get back. Why don't you just watch the nice Speedo, now?"

Spo stared at the set, shriveling into a corner of the couch. "Don't want to get back," he said weakly.

Bev said with a wink, "Ken, why don't we just forget about Spo, He won't even try."

"Not the right approach," he said.

"Don't tell *me* what the approach is."

"I'll tell you anything I want." Ken felt the anger beginning, anger at Spo, at Bev. It was always the same. They got back, but the price you had to pay was too much. "It's *my* office who sent him and I'll handle him as I see fit."

"Yes," Bev said, "but it all falls on me. Who does the cleaning up after they've left? Who has to look at their frightened, meek little faces?"

"*I* do."

"You're a stubborn, selfish man. You have to be to keep on taking them in time and again. Aren't you sick of them?"

Ken seized his wife's wrists. "Listen," he said, trying to be calm. "You're not helping this. Shut up! After he's reacclimated then we can deal with this."

Bev tore free of his grip and slapped him hard in the face. "Damn you!" she cried. "Damn you!" She ran out the front door and slammed it.

Spo stared at him, interested.

Ken rubbed his cheek. "Would you like a drink?" he said. "You can drink, can't you?"

Spo said nothing. "Ignore her," Ken said pointlessly. "The marriage was a mistake. But we just have to go on."

Spo's luminous eyes were curiously empty. "Isn't that what it's all about down here?" Ken said bitterly. "Going on. Maybe you think with your experiences in orbit that you're different, but you sure as hell aren't. That's all over, friend, and you've got to live right here like the rest of us. And the hell with you." He walked to the liquor cabinet, took out a tall glass and, his wrist trembling, poured it full of vodka,

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downed it in three burning swallows. Bev, he thought. That damned woman. The reacclimatization job, and now this. A man had a right to more than this.

Spo watched the host stagger away from the drinking place and into the adjoining room. There was the sound of retching. I don't want to be reacclimated, he thought, but it lacked urgency to him. They took it out of you. The man came back from the kitchen and squatted tensely before Spo, holding his empty glass. "Look," the man said, "it is important that you listen to me. I'm trying. We're all trying. You can't go back. You have to accept the way things are, just like I do. You have no choice."

"I don't want to live here!" Spo cried. "I don't want no other way of life!" He leapt from his seat and turned toward the door.

The man grabbed his arm. "This is the only way!" he screamed. "For all of us. You have to accept —"

Spo whirled frantically and struck the man in the jaw. The man fell backward into the speaking thing. His head struck its corner with awful force and then he lay quietly.

Spo looked again at the knobs, dials, switches and cords. Only then did he smile as he sat in the chair, alone with the speaking thing and with the terrible sounds that filled the room.

His name had been Jim, Spo thought. Jim. All right, he would be Jim again.

Jim sat in the room and thought about what he would do to the woman when she returned. And then he would be *fully* reacclimated.

Coming next month

31st Anniversary All-Star Issue

"Death of a Foy" by ISAAC ASIMOV
"Feesters In the Lake" by BOB LEMAN
"Tell Us A Story" by ZENNA HENDERSON
"The World Science Fiction Convention of 2080" by IAN WATSON
"Echo" by WALTER TEVIS
"The Attleborough Poltergeist" by RICHARD COWPER
"Wolfland" by TANITH LEE

Watch for the October issue, on sale August 28.

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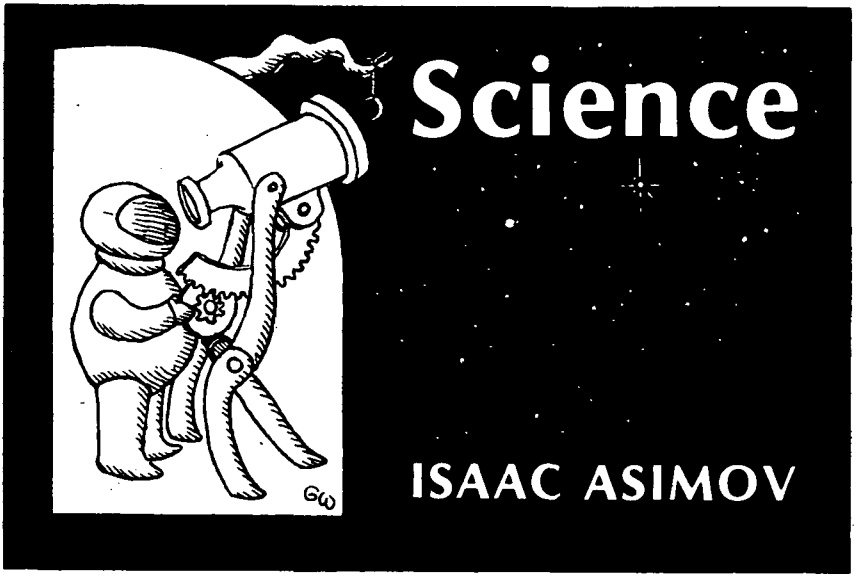

GETTING DOWN TO BASICS

When you're signing autographs, there's no use being grumpy about it. People are flattering you with their interest in you, and they deserve at least the reward of friendliness and banter, and so I try to provide it.

With experience, I've worked up a lot of banter-items, the best of which are, of course, those which elicit smiles and are unanswerable so that we can move on. Occasionally, of course, the unanswerables are answered.

For instance, suppose a good-looking woman in her late youth hands me a book to sign and says (as she often does), "My son is simply mad about you, Dr. Asimov. He reads every book of yours he can possibly get hold of."

In that case, as I sign, I am quite likely to say, with a winning smile on my frank and ingenuous countenance, "How delightful! Imagine how pleased and honored he would feel if you and I were to have an affair."

There is bound to be a giggle and, since it is an unanswerable remark, it's on to the next.

Except for once, when, after I had suavely delivered myself of my pleasantly outrageous remark, the woman before me stood her ground and said, "Dr. Asimov, if we were to have an affair, *I* would be pleased and honored."

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And with my remark neatly topped, all I could do was stare at her in pink-cheeked silence.

Serves me right, of course.

My only consolation is that in the game of science, which is the occupation of my more serious moments, having one's best answers proven insufficient is the common state of affairs. Consider the matter of getting down to basics, for instance.

Step One—The Greek Elements

The first person in our Western tradition of rational inquiry who concerned himself with the basic composition of the universe was the Greek philosopher, Thales (624-546 B.C.) His answer was "Water."

Other philosophers had other suggestions, and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) listed four basic substances: earth, water, air, fire, for the world about us, and a fifth, ether, for the heavenly objects.

Each of these was eventually named "elementum" in Latin ("element" in English), a word which, oddly enough, is of unknown origin.

Step Two—The Chemical Elements

The doctrine of the five Greek elements lasted two thousand years. Then, in 1661, the English chemist, Robert Boyle (1627-1691) published "The Sceptical Chemist."

Science had by then become experimental and inductive, rather than introspective and deductive as among the Greeks, and Boyle suggested that an element had to be tested in the chemical laboratory. If it could not be broken down into still simpler substance, then—and only then—it could be so labelled. By this criterion, there were twelve elements known in Boyle's time: gold, silver, copper, tin, iron, lead, mercury, carbon, sulfur, arsenic, antimony, and phosphorus.

The number continued to grow. The French chemist, Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) published "Elementary Treatise on Chemistry" in 1789, and in it he included a table that listed 31 chemical elements.

Step Three—Atoms

Even if one were satisfied that the Universe is made up of various elements, existing singly and in combination, and were convinced that the various elements had been correctly identified, isolated and studied, the question of what the basic materials of the Universe might be would remain not completely answered.

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After all, if gold is an element, what is gold made of? Is it made of little partiles of gold mashed together into bigger chunks? If so, how small a particle of gold can you have? Is there such a thing as an ultimately small gold particle that can be divided into nothing smaller?

Some Greek philosophers thought that every element consisted of tiny indivisible particles, and Democritus (470-380 B.C.) called such a particle "atomos" ("atom" in English) from a Greek word meaning "indivisible."

Democritus' atomic theory did not carry conviction to the ancient Greeks, but once experimental science was established, the evidence in favor of atoms began slowly to accumulate.

The English chemist, John Dalton (1766-1844), was the first to summarize all such evidence in a convincing manner. In 1808, he published a book entitled "New System of Chemical Philosophy" in which the atomic theory was spelled out in great detail.

The answer to the question: "What is the Universe made of?" could then be given as "Atoms."

There were, of course, different kinds of atoms, one kind for each element. Gold was made up of gold atoms, iron of iron atoms, oxygen of oxygen atoms, and so on. Atoms could join in atom-combinations called "molecules," and all the myriad of substances we see about us which are not elements are made up of molecules that, in turn, are made up of more than one kind of atom. Some of the substances in living organisms consist of molecules made up of millions of atoms of five or six different kinds.

Of course, if we stick to experimental science, it might well seem that we can only deal with those portions of the Universe with which we could experiment; that is, the accessible portions of the Earth itself. In that case, we might never really have an answer to the question, "What is the *Universe* made of?" We could only hope that the matter about us is representative of the Universe.

The French mathematician Auguste Comte (1798-1857) pointed this out in 1835 and suggested that the question of the chemical structure of the stars must remain forever unaswerable.

Two years after Comte died, however, the German physicist Gustav Robert Kirchhoff (1824-1887) worked out the principles of spectroscopy, and by 1862, the Swedish physicist Anders Jonas Angstrom (1814-1874) used it to show there was hydrogen in the Sun. Other spectroscopic investigations made it quite clear that the same atoms that existed about us were also to be found in the heavenly bodies. The atomic answer was indeed for the Universe and not for earth alone.

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Still, as the number of elements mounted, and, therefore, the number of different kinds of atoms, scientists grew restive. Intuition seemed to indicate that the answer to the question "What is the Universe made of?" had to be simple. If the basic building blocks were numerous and, apparently, unrelated, then surely that was the best sign that they weren't really basic but that they must in turn be composed of still more fundamental objects that *were* few in number.

By 1869 there were sixty-three different elements known, with no end in sight. In that year, however, the Russian chemist Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev (1834-1907) published his first version of the periodic table. In it, the elements were divided into families that were related in properties among themselves. This made the elements more orderly and not so miscellaneous and eased the discomfort of scientists somewhat.

Yet by the 1890s there were over eighty elements known and there was *still* no end in sight.

Step Four—Electrons and Atomic Nuclei

In the last quarter of the 1800's, scientists had been studying "cathode rays," produced when an electric current was forced through a vacuum. The studies made it seem that electricity, like matter, might be composed of indivisible units. The Irish physicist George Johnstone Stoney (1826-1911) suggested, in 1891, that the indivisible unit of electric charge be called an "electron."

In 1897, the English physicist Joseph John Thomson (1856-1940) presented the final evidence that cathode rays consisted of electrically charged particles and those received Stoney's name of "electron." Thomson was further able to show that the mass of the electron was only a small fraction (1/1837, actually) of the hydrogen atom, which was the lightest atom known. The electron was a "sub-atomic particle," the first to be discovered.

Could it be that electrons were purely a phenomenon of electric charge and had nothing to do with matter?

No! In 1896, the French physicist Antoine Henri Becquerel (1852-1908) had shown that uranium atoms broke down and gave off penetrating radiations. By 1900, some of those radiations were shown to consist of speeding electrons that must have emerged from the uranium atoms.

Nor was this a matter of one peculiar element. In 1902, the German physicist Philipp E. A. Lenard (1862-1947) showed that certain perfectly stable metals, when exposed to light, gave off electrons. Clearly, atoms

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were not indivisible but were made up of smaller particles still, including electrons.

The British physicist Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937) bombarded thin metal foil with radioactive radiation and, in 1911, produced evidence to show that atoms contained nearly all their mass in a very tiny atomic nucleus in the center of the atom. Whereas the typical atom was 10^{-8} centimeters in diameter, the atomic nucleus was 10^{-13}centimeters in diameter. The nucleus had only 1/100,000 the diameter of the atom and 1/1,000,000,000,000,000 the volume. The outer regions of the atom were filled with light electrons.

The English physicist Henry Gwyn-Jeffreys Moseley (1887-1915) was able to show, in 1913, that the atomic nuclei of different elements had positive electric charges of characteristic size; charges which were always the same for atoms of any one element, and always different for atoms of different elements.

It might seem, then, that the Universe was made up of atomic nuclei differing among themselves in the size of their positive electric charge, plus electrons, all of the same negative charge, surrounding each nucleus in just large enough numbers to match the nuclear charge and produce a neutral atom.

By 1916, the American chemist Gilbert Newton Lewis (1875-1946) began the process of showing the electrons to exist in concentric shells within the atom and using that to explain chemical properties. This accounted for the existence of families of elements and explained why the periodic table existed in the form it did.

What's more, the existence of charges of fixed values on the atomic nuclei limited the number of elements that could exist. It became clear that there couldn't be many more than 80 different stable elements.

Step Five—Electrons, Protons and Neutrons

The atomic nuclei were not entirely satisfactory as basic constituents of the Universe. Where electrons were all alike, atomic nuclei differed among themselves both in mass and in electric charge. The smallest nucleus, that of hydrogen, had a positive electric charge equal in size to the negative charge on the electron, but all other nuclei had positive charges that were integral multiples of that on the hydrogen nucleus. It seemed reasonable to suppose that the atomic nucleus consisted of varying numbers of whatever particle it was that made up the hydrogen nucleus. Rutherford called the hydrogen-nucleus particle the "proton" from the Greek word for "first."

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To begin with, though, it was quite clear that the atomic nucleus could not consist of protons only. For instance, the helium nucleus had twice the charge of the hydrogen nucleus but four times the mass. It took four protons to supply the mass, but they would supply four times the charge, too.

For some years, it was thought that electrons were also present in nuclei and served to neutralize some of the positive charge. Unfortunately, the protons and electrons also had something called "spin" and so did the nuclei. If protons and electrons were so arranged as to account for the mass and charge of the nucleus, they often did not account for the spin.

Then, in 1932, the English physicist James Chadwick (1891-1974) discovered the neutron, which was just about as massive as the proton but did not carry an electric charge. It became clear that atomic nuclei were made up of protons and neutrons. Combinations of protons and neutrons could be made to account for the mass and charge of all the nuclei, and the spins as well. Such combinations also explained the existence of isotopes, first demonstrated in 1914 by the English chemist Frederick Soddy (1877-1956). Though all nuclei of a given element had the same number of protons, they could be divided into two or more groups, each with a slightly different number of neutrons.

For a few happy years, it seemed that the Universe was made up of just three different kinds of particles: electrons with a charge of -1, protons with a charge of $+1$, and neutrons with a charge of 0. What could be neater?

Step Six—Leptons and Hadrons

Euphoria did not last long.

For one thing, there was a curious asymmetry. Protons and electrons had electric charges of precisely the same size though of opposite nature, but the proton was 1836 times as massive as the electrons. Why?

An answer of sorts came in 1930, when the English physicist Paul A. M. Dirac (1902-) pointed out that each particle should have an "anti-particle," equal and opposite. In 1932, the American physicist Carl David Anderson (1905-), studying cosmic ray particles, detected the "anti-electron," or "positron," in the debris. It had a mass and charge equal to the electron, but the charge was positive rather than negative. In 1955, the Italian-American physicist Emilio Segre (1905-) and the American physicist Owen Chamberlain (1902-) detected the "anti-proton," which had a mass and charge equal to the proton, but with a negative rather than a positive charge.

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It was clear that there were two parts to the Universe, so to speak, an ordinary part and an anti-part, and that each was asymmetric in opposite sense. The two together formed a symmetry, but at the price of doubling the complexity of the Universe.

Other complications were developing, too. There was, for instance, a puzzle over the nature of the forces holding the atomic nucleus together.

As late as 1932, it had seemed that two forces in the Universe were sufficient to explain the motions and interactions of all its parts: the gravitational interaction and the electromagnetic interaction.

The electromagnetic interaction was far, far the stronger of the two, but the gravitational interaction dominated the Universe as a whole because it was entirely an attractive force, while the electromagnetic interaction involved both attractions and repulsions that largely neutralized each other.

Once it was discovered that the atomic nucleus consisted of protons and neutrons, neither interaction would explain its existence. The gravitational interaction was far too weak to hold it together, while the electromagnetic interaction acted to drive it apart. There had to be some nuclear interaction stronger than the electromagnetic interaction to hold it together against the force of electromagnetic repulsion. And it had to be short-range so as not to be noticeable at more than nuclear distances.

In 1935, the Japanese physicist Hideki Yukawa (1907-) worked out the theoretical background for such a "strong interaction." Some time later, the Italian physicist Enrico Fermi (1901-1954) showed that a second nuclear interaction and a much weaker one (the "weak interaction") were needed to account for radioactive breakdown and a number of other particle interactions.

It then became possible to divide subatomic particles into two types. There are the "hadrons" (from a Greek word meaning "thick" or "strong"), which can respond to the strong interaction as well as to the weak, and the "leptons" (from a Greek word meaning "weak"), which can respond only to the weak interaction and *not* to the strong.

The proton, anti-proton, neutron and anti-neutron are hadrons, while the electron and anti-electron are leptons.

Another source of complication came about when scientists studied nuclear interactions in increasing detail and found that additional particles were needed if all the events were to be explained. In 1931, the Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958) had suggested that when an electron was emitted in a radioactive breakdown, it had to be accompanied by another particle without either mass or electric charge. Fermi called it a

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"neutrino" ("little neutral one" in Italian).

A particle without mass or charge is difficult indeed to detect, and it wasn't until 1956 that the task was accomplished by the American physicist Frederick Reines (1918-). Naturally, it turned out that there was not only a neutrino but an anti-neutrino.

Then, too, as scientists dealt with higher and higher energies, either when studying cosmic rays or by working with more and more elaborate particle accelerators, they found that more and more energetic particles could be formed and detected. These were all unstable particles quickly breaking down to more stable ones such as electrons or protons, but they existed, even if only temporarily, and they complicated the Universe.

Thus, in 1935, Carl Anderson detected the "muon" with properties identical to the electron but possessing 207 times the mass. There is also an "anti-muon." In addition there are muon-neutrinos and muon-anti-neutrinos which are identical to the ordinary electron-neutrinos and anti-neutrinos in every respect that we can measure but which behave differently in nuclear reactions and so must have *some* difference we're not subtle enough yet to see.

The muons and their neutrinos are also leptons, and there are indications that there are still more massive leptons, a "tau-electron" with its associated anti-particle and "tau-neutrinos." If the energy supply were unlimited, it may be that there would be an endless series of leptons of greater mass, each with its anti-particle and neutrino and anti-neutrino.

The hadrons exist in even greater variety, some less massive than the proton and neutron, some more massive. The less massive ones are "mesons" from the Greek word for "intermediate" because their mass is intermediate between the proton and electron. The more massive ones are "hyperons" from the Greek word for "beyond."

The least massive hadron is the "pion," first detected in 1947 by the English physicist Cicil Frank Powell (1903-1969). It is about 1/7 as massive as a proton (270 times as massive as an electron) and comes in five varieties. There is a positive and negative pion, each with its anti-particle, and a neutral pion which is its own antibody.

Mesons and hyperons multiplied rapidly until well over a hundred were discovered with more constantly piling in. The sheer number of hadrons called for some explanation. Could they all be built up from still more basic particles?

Step Seven—Leptons and Quarks

In 1953, the American physicist Murray Gell-Mann (1929-) worked

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out a system whereby the hadrons could be arranged in families. It was a sort of periodic table of hadrons like Mendeleev's table of chemical elements. To make sense of Mendeleev's table one needed three sub-atomic particles, the electron, proton and neutron. To make sense of Gell-Mann's periodic table of hadrons, one needed three sub-hadronic particles.

Gell-Mann called his sub-hadronic particles "quarks" from a phrase in *Finnegan's Wake*, which goes "three quarks for Muster Mark."

Gell-Mann needed only two types of quarks to begin with, and they are called "up-quarks" and "down-quarks," or *u* and *d*, for purposes of distinction, though the description must not be taken literally. The electric charge of the *u* is +2/3 and that of the *d* is −1/3. Two *d*'s and a *u* total 0 and make a neutron. Two *u*'s and a *d* total +1 and make a proton. Naturally there are anti-*d*'s and anti-*u*s, and these can form the anti-neutron and anti-proton.

Other combinations form various hyperons. If the quarks are taken two at a time, a quark and an anti-quark, mesons are formed. Whatever the combinations, the fractional charges must disappear. The overall charge of quark-combinations must be 0, 1, 2...

There seem to be analogies between leptons and quarks. Just as in leptons there is a basic pair, electron/neutrino and the antiparticles of each; so in quarks there is a basic pair, *u*-quark/*d*-quark and the anti-particles of each.

In leptons, additional energy can produce electron analogs of more and more mass—muons, tau-electrons and so on, each with its neutrinos and its anti-particles. In quarks, additional energy can produce quarks of more and more mass, each with its pair and its anti-particles.

Thus, more energetic than the *u* and the *d* are the *s*-quark and the *c*-quark (where the *s* and *c* are stated, with physicists' whimsy to stand for "strangeness" and "charm"). Beyond that may be the *t*-quark and the *b*-quark ("top" and "bottom," or to be more poetic, "truth" and "beauty"), and so on. Each level is a "flavor."

The world of quarks is considerably more complicated than the world of leptons, however. The leptons are distinguished among themselves by mass and charge, and so are the quarks—but the quarks are also distinguished among themselves by properties that leptons do not possess but which are called (metaphorically only) "color." Each different flavor of quark comes in varieties which are called "red," "blue" and "green."

When quarks get together three at a time, there must be one red quark, one green quark and one blue quark, the combination being without color,

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or "white." When they get together two at a time, it is always a color and an anti-color. The colors always disappear in the quark combinations, as the fractional charges do. The study of quark combinations is therefore called "quantum chromodynamics," or "QCD," the "chromo-" coming from the Greek for "color."

What's more, the quarks *do* combine, while leptons do not, since the quarks are subject to the strong interaction and the leptons are not. Involved in the quark combination is a special particle which is constantly exchanged by them and which holds them together. This is the "gluon," so-called for obvious reasons.

So far, no one has been able to pull hadrons apart and study the individual quarks, and there are some theories of quark combinations that hold it is impossible to do that.

Another alternative is to form quarks from scratch by concentrating enough energy into a small volume, as by smashing together very energetic streams of electrons and anti-electrons. The quarks produced would instantly combine into hadrons and anti-hadrons which would stream off in opposite directions If there were *enough* energy there would be three streams forming a three-leaf clover: hadrons, anti-hadrons and gluons. The two-leaf clover has been formed, and in 1979, there were announcements of experiments in which a very rudimentary third leaf was just beginning to form. This is considered a confirmation of the quark theory.

Step Eight—?

The lepton/quark theory is the best way we have yet of explaining the fundamental basis of the Universe, but there are still questions. Why are there both quarks *and* leptons? Why are there quarks in so many colors? Why must quarks combine while leptons can remain free?

Could there be something more basic still?

An Israeli physicist, Haim Harari, suggests sub-leptonic and sub-quarkic particles he calls "rishons" from a Hebrew word meaning first. He suggests a T-rishon with an electric charge of +1/3 and a V-rishon with an electric charge of 0 and anti-rishons in both cases; and he contends that leptons and quarks can *both* be built up out of rishons taken three at a time.

Is he correct? And if he is correct, will this be the end? Will we finally have gotten down to basics at last? Or can it be that there are no basics, but that we are sliding down a chute without a bottom and that the search for fundamental particles leads us on toward a goal that recedes as fast as we approach it?

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Susan Petrey wrote "Spareen Among the Tartars" (September 1979), an unusual and very well received story about a Varkela "vampire" or leechman-healer. We have a new Spareen story coming up soon, but for now consider this change of pace, a superior fantasy about a musical spider.

Spidersong

BY

SUSAN C. PETREY

Brenneker, the lyre spider, lived inside a lute, a medieval instrument resembling a pear-shaped guitar. The lute was an inexpensive copy of one made by an old master and had rosewood walls and a spruce sounding board. Her home was sparcely furnished, a vast expanse of unfinished wood, a few sound pegs reaching from floor to ceiling like Greek columns, and in one corner, near the small F-shape sound holes, the fantasy of iron-silk thread that was Brenneker's web. Brenneker's home was an unusual one for a lyre spider. Most of them spin their webs in hollow tawba stalks, which echo the music of these tiny fairy harps seldom heard by ears of men. Lyre spiders play duets with each other, sometimes harmonizing, sometimes bouncing counterpoint melodies back and forth across the glades between the tall bamboo-like tawba. They play their webs to attract prey, to win a mate, or for the sheer joy of music. They live alone except for the few weeks in mother's silken egg case and one day of spiderlings climbing up the tawba to cast their threads into the wind and fly away. When they mate, the embrace lasts but a few moments. Then the female eats the male, who gives himself gladly to this deepest union of two souls.

Originally, Brenneker had lived in the forest, surrounded by the music of her own kind. Although she lived alone, she was never lonely, for she could always hear the mandolin-like plucking of Twinklebright, her nearest neighbor, the deep, droning chords of old Birdslayer, and occasionally the harpsichord tones of Klavier, carried on the breeze.

One hot afternoon as Brenneker experimented with augmented fifths, she

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noticed that some of her neighbors had stopped midsong. She suddenly realized she was the only one still playing and she stopped abruptly, leaving a leading tone hanging on the air like an unfinished sentence.

"These ones should do," she heard a man's voice say. An angry blow struck the base of her tawba stalk. She felt herself falling as the tawba that was her home broke at the base, tumbling her to the floor of the glade below. Bruised and frightened, she scampered quickly back inside her home and clung to her silent, broken web. She felt herself lifted up and then dropped with a jar as her tawba was tossed into a wagon.

Over many hours of jolting and rattling, she fell asleep, and when she awoke, all was quiet and dark. She climbed out of her stalk and began to explore her new surroundings, a workbench with many hollow wooden objects lying about. Although she had never seen a musical instrument such as men make, she recognized with the eye of a musician that their shape was intended to give sound. She chose a lute and squeezed her plump body through one of the sound holes, saying, "Certainly this will give greater tone than my old home." She began to string her web.

At night there was no music in the instrument maker's shop, and she was lonely without the songs of her friends to cheer her. Since she was also hungry, she played her hunger song, and a fat, stupid moth came, aching to be devoured. When she'd finished with him, she tossed his powdery wings out the sound hole.

In the morning, the old instrument maker, Sanger, came to open up his shop. He paused in the shop doorway rattling his keys and then turned on the overhead light. Brenneker watched him from the sound holes of her new home as he ran a wrinkled hand through his sparse, gray hair, stuffed his keys back into a deep pocket, and picked a viola from the wall. Carefully, he adjusted the tuning of the strings, and then, picking up the bow, he played a short, lilting tune and then replaced the instrument on its peg on the wall. He made his way along the wall, pausing at each instrument to check the tuning. When he came to Brenneker's lute, he did the same, tightening the strings briefly and then playing a few bars of melody. Brenneker felt her whole surroundings vibrate with the tone and her web pulsed in sympathetic vibration. Timidly, she picked out a few notes of the song.

"Odd," said Mr. Sanger, "I'd never noticed that it had such lovely overtones. Too bad I had to use such cheap materials in its construction." He placed the lute back on the wall and was about to pick up a zither, when the shop bell rang to announce that someone had come in from the street.

A young girl and her father came through the door and paused to look at violins.

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"But I don't want to play violin," said the girl, who was about ten years old. "Everyone plays violin. I want something different."

"Well, what about a guitar," said her father. "Your friend Marabeth plays one quite well. It seems like a proper instrument for a young lady."

"But that's just it," said the girl, whose name Brenneker later found out was Laurel. "I don't want to copycat someone else. I want an instrument that isn't played by just anyone. I want something special."

Sanger interrupted this conversation to say, "Have you considered the lute?" He removed Brenneker's home from the wall and strummed a chord. The vibration in the web tickled Brenneker's feet as she strummed the same chord an octave higher.

"What a lovely tone it has!" said Laurel, touching the strings and plucking them one by one.

"Be careful," said her father. "That's an antique."

"Not so," said Sanger, "it's a copy. Made it myself. And I intended it to be played, not just looked at like a dusty old museum piece."

"May I try?" asked the girl. Sanger gave the instrument to her and she sat down on a stool, placing the lute across her lap. She strummed a discord which caused Brenneker to flinch and grip her strings tightly so they wouldn't sound.

"Let me show you how," said the instrument maker. "Put your first finger in that fret and your middle finger there, like so." He indicated where the fingers should fret the strings to make a chord. Laurel plucked the strings one by one. The tone was tinny but true. The second time she plucked, Brenneker plucked inside, on her own instrument. Rich, golden tones emanated from the lute.

"Oh, Father, this is the instrument for me," said Laurel.

"But who will teach you to play such an antiquated instrument?"

"I would be glad to," said Sanger. "I have studied medieval and Renaissance music and I would like to share it with an interested pupil."

"Please, Father?"

"Well, perhaps...there is the question of cost. I can't afford a very expensive instrument," said her father.

"This lute, although made with loving care and much skill," said Sanger, "is unfortunately made of inexpensive wood, and for that reason it is very reasonably priced."

Mr. Sanger and Laurel's father were able to make agreeable terms for the lute and the cost of lessons. That morning Laurel took the lute, Brenneker and all, home with her.

The first few weeks of lessons were torture for Brenneker, who sat huddled, clenching her strings to her body to damp them. But as Laurel improved, Brenneker rewarded her by playing in unison. This was great incentive to Laurel, who did not realize that she was only partial author of the lovely

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music. Mr. Sanger was himself at a loss to explain how such beautiful tones came from such a cheaply built instrument. He did not credit his workmanship, although this was in some measure responsible, but told Laurel that the lute was haunted by a fairy harpist, and he advised her to leave a window open at night and put out a bowl of milk and honey before she went to bed. Perhaps he had been the beneficiary of such a fairy in the past, for Brenneker found that the milk and the open window provided her with a bountiful supply of flies and insects, which she tempted by song through the sound holes of the lute to make her supper.

Sanger valued highly the virtue of two playing in harmony. "For the ability to blend with another in duet is a mark of maturity in a true musician," he would say. "Harmony between two players recaptures for us briefly that time when the universe was young, untainted by evil, and the morning stars sang together."

Brenneker never played by herself unless she was sure that she was alone. She played when Laurel played or at night when everyone was sleeping. When spring came that year, she played the mating song and waited, but no lover came. The next night she tried again, this time varying the tune and adding trills, but still no one came. Brenneker tried for several nights before she finally admitted to herself that there was no fault in her song, but that none of her folk dwelt in this faraway land and so there was no one to answer. But this reasoning made her feel unhappy, and she preferred to think that it might be some imperfection in her song, which could be righted by practice.

As Laurel grew older, Brenneker noticed that the quality of their music changed. Whereas she had formerly been a lover of sprightly dance tunes, Laurel became more interested in old ballads and would sing as she accompanied herself on the lute. One of her favorites was "Barbara Allen," another, "The Wife of Ushers Well."

She was often asked to perform at weddings and parties. She met other lovers of medieval music and even other lute players. Laurel would sometimes allow others to play her instrument, which drew a mixed response. If Brenneker knew the tune of the strange artist, she would pick along. If not, she held her strings silent, leaving the others to wonder how Laurel got such rounded tones where they only strummed dull, tinny notes.

One summer evening Laurel took a blanket, the lute and Brenneker to a woodsy place and sat down alone to play. She sang many of the old ballads and then she would stop for a while and listen. Then she would play another song. Brenneker wondered at this until she heard answering notes from a recorder in a grove nearby. The two instruments played a duet, with occasional counterpoint melody, and

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then the recorder player drew near, and Brenneker saw that it was a young man.

"Aha," she thought, "Laurel plays to attract a mate."

The young man sat down beside Laurel on the grass.

"I knew you'd come," he said to her.

She moved over toward him and he put an arm around her waist and kissed her.

This went on for quite some time. After a while the two said goodbye, and Laurel picked up her blanket and trudged homeward, while her love went in the other direction.

"Strange," thought Brenneker. "She did not eat him." This bothered the lyre spider until she stopped to reflect; "Birds do not eat their mates. Perhaps the humans are like birds, but I had always thought them more intelligent than that."

A few nights later, Laurel took her blanket and went to the grove again. The young man, whose name was Thomas, was there waiting for her. They played a few songs and then they made love. As she walked home, Laurel sang "Barbara Allen."

"And still she does not eat him," thought Brenneker. "Their way of being together is different from ours. Yet I'm sure it must mean as much to them as ours does to us. Yet it seems so incomplete. Impermanent."

The presence of the human lovers made Brenneker more aware of her own loneliness. "If I could mate," she thought. "I would make the most beautiful egg-sack all of silk, and my eggs would sway to the music of the lute until they hatched. Then they would fly to neighboring trees and build their own lyres and play to me and I wouldn't be alone anymore." But when she played her love songs, softly on the night air, no lover came. She was used to it by now, but she never gave up hope.

One evening the two lovers had a quarrel.

"You must marry me this fall," Thomas insisted.

"But we have no money," Laurel objected. "You are only an apprentice at your trade, and it will be a long time before you bring home a journeyman's wage. I would not be able to go to the university to study music."

"We would get by somehow," said Thomas. "You could take in music students and teach the lute. We could pick up a little extra money playing for gatherings."

"But I do so much want to go to the university," said Laurel. "We could go to the city and both take jobs. That way we could be together and I could study for my degree."

"I can't get as good a job in the city as here," said Thomas, "and besides, you could not earn enough to support yourself and pay tuition. So you might as well settle here with me."

"There has to be a way for me to continue my study of music," said

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Laurel, "and I intend to find it."

When Thomas left, he did not kiss Laurel goodbye.

Laurel, thoughtful and concerned, put her lute aside and went to bed early. She did not forget to leave a window open, however, or set out milk to feed the fairy. Brenneker pondered their dilemma and could see no solution. While she was brooding over this, she heard the unmistakable sound of a lyre spider tuning up its instrument, and this caused her to listen intently. It was a curious song, having a haunting quality, a shadowing of minor key but not quite. This was no spider song, Brenneker was sure, but it was definitely played by one of her own kind. She strummed an answering chord and the other player stopped in midphrase as if startled. Brenneker played part of an old song she'd played many times at home. The other answered her with the refrain of the song, and so they played back and forth for a while until the other stopped. Brenneker was somewhat disappointed that the song had ended, but a few moments later she discovered why. A gentle tapping on the sounding board roused her attention and she went to the F holes to peer out. The other spider, a male, had followed her music and had come to investigate. He clambered up the side of the instrument to her vantage point.

"How lovely," he said, "to hear the songs of home in a strange land. Tell me, Lady, how did you come here?"

"By accident," said Brenneker. "The humans picked my tawba stalk for a flute and brought me here. But I have never seen another of our kind here until now."

"I came in similar fashion," said the male. "My name is Wisterness, and, until now, I had thought I was the only one of our kind that had ranged so widely."

"What was that strange tune you played? Is it in a minor key? I have heard none like it before," said Brenneker.

"It's neither major or minor," said Wisterness. "It is based on a modal scale like some of the Renaissance music I've heard you play. I've noticed that you sometimes play in the Dorian mode, which is somewhat similar. Actually, I was playing a southern mountain tune called 'June Apple.' The tuning is called 'mountain minor,' or 'A to G' tuning among them, but it is actually the older double-tonic scale, based on the highland bagpipe tuning, or, according to some sources, the Irish Harp."

"My goodness," said Brenneker, "you certainly know a lot about music. I haven't heard half of those words. I do remember playing 'Scarborough Fair' in the Dorian mode, but that's about the extent of my music theory."

"I may know more theory, but you are the better musician, Lady. I am always barely learning one tune and then going on to something new. Consequently my playing lacks polish. I

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have listened to your songs for several nights before summoning the courage to answer."

"I certainly have no complaint against your playing," said Brenneker. "I thought it was quite beautiful. I am curious about one thing, though, and that is your age. I never knew male spiders lived much more than a few years, yet you seem quite mature and well-read. Have you never mated?"

Wisterness shuffled his pedipalps and appeared slightly embarrassed.

"No, I never have," he said. "There was one once in my youth that I cared for, but she chose to devour another. Then one day I followed a woodsman to listen to his song, and I was carried off in a load of wood and eventually came to this place. Since then I have devoted myself to the study of humans and their music, but it has been lonely at times."

Since it was not the mating time, Wisterness left after awhile and went back to his lyre, which was strung in a hollow tree not far from the window, and he and Brenneker played duets most of the night. But sometimes she paused to listen to the piercing modal sweetness of Wisterness, as he experimented with different tunings from the lonely southern mountains.

The next morning, Laurel did not sit down to her music at the usual time, but instead put on her coat and went out with a purposeful look in her eyes. The next day, at the practice hour, a younger girl came to Laurel's door carrying a lute under her arm, and Laurel taught her a lesson. It was "Greensleeves," a favorite of Brenneker's, and she played along at first, but the student had troubles, and they kept stopping midverse and starting over until Brenneker decided it was more pain than pleasure and gave it up. Before the student left, she counted out a small sum of money which Laurel put in a large jar on her dresser. This money, Brenneker learned, was to go toward Laurel's university tuition.

As the weeks passed, more students came, until Laurel had five beginners to teach. One student came twice a week from a distant township. Sanger, the old instrument maker, still came by once in a while to teach Laurel a song, but she had long ago surpassed him in musical skill, and he never charged for his "lessons" anymore. His fingers had grown arthritic and he could not play as well as he had in the past. He no longer took students, which made Laurel one of the few teachers of the lute in her part of the country. The money piled up slowly in the jar, but it was nowwhere near enough, and sometimes Brenneker would overhear Laurel arguing with her father at night about her plans to go to the university.

"Even if you get a degree in music," he would say, "that doesn't guarantee that you'll be able to support yourself. Why not study something practical that you can find a good job in."

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Laurel agreed to take courses in handicrafts and midwifery to pacify her father, whom she still depended upon for support, but her heart belonged to music, and she refused to give up her plans for further study.

When she saw Thomas now, they both avoided talking about future plans, as this always provoked a fight, and he did not come to see her as often. Brenneker fretted about this, as she saw Laurel suffering in silence. When Laurel played, Brenneker sometimes wove her mating song into the web of sound hoping that Thomas would hear and return to renew his love. But he did not hear, or if he did, he didn't come.

One warm spring night, Brenneker alone played her mating song hopefully to the open window, and after a short time Wisterness came, tapping shyly on her sound box to announce his presence.

"You must come out," he said, "for the sound holes are too small for me to get in."

Brenneker had failed to recognize her predicament. As a young spider, she had entered through the holes with ease, but now she was bigger, and therefore trapped within the lute. She forced her legs out the F holes, and she could feel the tantalizing closeness of his belly fur, but try as they might, they could not negotiate across the wooden barrier.

Finally he said, "Brenneker, I fear our love must go unconsummated, for you can't get out and I can't get in. But then perhaps it's better that way, for even if we could somehow manage to mate, we could not partake of the deeper sharing, with you in there and me out here."

And so he left sadly. She did not hear his song for several days, and then one day the wind carried the distant strains of "Billy in the Lowground" to her window. The sad Irish mode echoing in the lonely Appalachian melody, told her that he had moved his harp farther away to avoid the pain of their unsatisfied need. He was too far to answer any of her musical questions or play the counterpoint games.

One day Laurel invited Thomas over to her home. She was very anxious to share a piece of news with him.

"The university is offering a music scholarship," she said. "There will be a contest and I intend to participate. If I win, my tuition would be paid, and if we both found jobs, we could be together while I go to school in the city."

Thomas thought about this before answering and then said, "It's not the money that really bothers me, it's your attitude. I get the feeling that I am not as important to you as your music. I want you to be happy, but I don't wish to play second fiddle to a lute."

"But my work is as important to me as yours is to you," said Laurel. "The truth is that neither of us wish to make the sacrifice of our career goals to be with the other."

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"I had hoped our love meant more to you than your music," said Thomas, "but I see I was wrong."

"It means equally as much to me," said Laurel, "I just don't think I should be the one to have to make the sacrifice of my career. There is no reason you couldn't get a job in the city. It would not be forever, only a few years. Then we could come back here and you could take up where you left off."

"I don't see it that way," he said. "In a few years I would be behind everyone in my training and I'd be competing with younger men whom they don't have to pay as much. If I stay, I have opportunity for advancement in a few years."

"Well, I suppose we will part, then when the summer's over," said Laurel. "I shall miss you terribly, but that's the way things work out sometimes. There is one last request I want to make of you, and that is, will you accompany my playing when I go to the contest?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Thomas. "It would be adding insult to injury if I participated in the very thing that takes you away from me."

After Thomas left, Laurel cried. She went to bed early and even forgot about the milk for the fairy. This did not disturb Brenneker very much, for she had lost her appetite listening to their argument. She was pondering Laurel's problem in her mind (it seemed strange that humans could have barriers to love more complex than her wooden cage) when she heard a strange grinding noise as of a small drill emanating from one corner of the lute. She scampered to the source of the sound and stood watching the smooth surface of the unfinished wood as the sound come nearer. Suddenly a little bump appeared in the surface, and then the bump dissolved in a small pile of sawdust, and an ugly bulbish head poked out of the newly formed hole. Brenneker pounced at the woodworm but missed as it pulled back into its tunnel. Frustrated, she stood tapping at the hole with her forelegs, as the worm withdrew and burrowed in a different direction.

"You must leave," said Brenneker to the worm. "You are destroying my home and Laurel's lute."

"There is plenty of wood here for both of us," came the muffled reply of the woodworm. "You may have the rosewood, and I'll eat only the spruce."

"But I don't eat wood," said Brenneker, "and you shouldn't eat this lute. There is plenty of other wood that you can eat. Leave my home alone. You are destroying a musical instrument. Have you no appreciation for music?"

"Hmm, yes, music," said the worm, whose name was Turkawee. "I've never cared for that funny-sounding stuff. Leave it to the birds, I always say."

"You ignorant barbarian!" exclaimed Brenneker.

"I think spiders are more barbaric than our kind," said Turkawee, "for spiders eat their cousins the insects,

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and even their own mates. You should take care whom you go calling a barbarian."

"Philistine, then!" snorted Brenneker. "You obviously have no concept of a higher culture than your own."

"Culture, you say?" said Turkawee. "That's a term my snooty Aunt Beetle used to use. She was always admiring the wings of butterflies. She knew an artist who made pictures of the wings. She ended up stuck with a pin to a cork board because all her interest in culture led her to follow a butterfly too closely into a collector's net. Culture is also for the birds, I say."

Brenneker, having no answer for this, retreated to her web and played the angriest song she could think of, which was a military march. The worm ignored her and continued gnawing at the wood of the lute.

Two days later, Brenneker was surveying the damage done by Turkawee. She was dismayed to find one part of the sounding board completely riddled with holes. She set about to mend it, binding the remaining wood with the steely white thread that she extruded from her spinnerets. The patch was actually quite strong, perhaps more so than the surrounding wood, but the discrepancy in the surface weakened the instrument structurally. The tension of the lute strings could cause the instrument to break, if the patch didn't hold.

Brenneker returned to her web by the sound posts and fell asleep. She wasn't used to making so much new thread, and the effort had drained her strength. In the night when she awoke, she called many insects to her supper with song, for she was ravenously hungry due to her exertion. The next day when Laurel tuned up the lute to play for a wedding, Brenneker noted with satisfaction that the patch held. But the ravages of the woodworm continued.

Old Sanger, the instrument maker, when he heard that Laurel intended to enter the scholarship contest, came by the house to offer his advice. He had played in competition in the past, and he knew what sort of artistry was apt to attract the notice of the judges and what displays of skill might sway their opinion.

"It is always a good idea to include in your repertoire a few songs that are not well known and played by everyone. And in the songs that are better known, try to display some different interpretation or more rare harmony. A few classical pieces in your presentation are in order, and playing a duet, or having someone accompany you is essential; so be sure to play your arrangement of "The Ash Grove" with that young-man friend of yours. Your counterpoint harmony mixes very well with his recorder, and such a presentation will be sure to impress the judges. They will be looking for that particular blending of tones that displays your sense of harmony not only with your

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partner but with yourself and the universe."

"Poor Laurel," thought Brenneker. "What will she do without Thomas' accompaniment?"

Laurel said nothing to Sanger about her falling out with Thomas, and after he left she practiced "The Ash Grove" unaccompanied and tried to develop some new variations on the old theme. Brenneker was tempted to play the recorder part, but since to do so would reveal her presence, she contented herself with her usual practice of playing in unison or one octave higher than the melody.

That night Brenneker made a tour of the inside of her home and found that the woodworm had damaged the bond where the neck of the lute joins the body. She set about to repair the damage as best she could, plugging the holes with spidersilk and binding the weakened seam with long, tough strands. It was hard work and took much of her strength. She could barely stay awake long enough to eat the cricket that came chirping to hear her music.

Finally the greatly anticipated day came and Laurel took the coach to the big city where the contest was to be held. She refused to surrender her lute to the baggage rack and carried it in her lap, where it provoked much comment among the other passengers.

"What is that strange instrument?" they would ask. Or, "Please play us a tune."

Laurel consented and filled the coach with dulcet tones as her clear voice transported all the listeners to "Scarborough Fair."

When they arrived in the city, Laurel spent some of her hard-earned lesson money on a room at the inn. That night when Laurel was asleep, Brenneker found more holes to fill. Turkawee had almost destroyed one of the interior braces of the frame. And not only that, but also he had eaten away most of the surface below the bridge. If this were to give way, the strings would go slack and the instrument would be unplayable. Brenneker worked far into the night, binding the lute with her webbing. So far her spider silk, being stronger in tensil strength than steel wire of its same proportions, had held the lute together. But Brenneker was worried that the damage was too extensive. The inside of the lute was completely webbed and re-webbed in silk and she knew it would not hold forever. She ate sparsely that night of the few insects that inhabit an inn and then forced her body to make more thread to continue the repairs. By daybreak she was nearly exhausted. She tried to get some sleep but Laurel woke early, concerned about the contest, and practiced her pieces, causing Brenneker to get no sleep at all.

Brenneker dozed on the carriage trip across town to the university but awoke in time to restring and tune her musical web before the contest began.

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Both Brenneker and Laurel fidgeted nervously as they awaited their turn to play. There were many contestants, including a few lutists. One young man held the very antique instrument of which Laurel's was a copy. He allowed Laurel to stroke the strings once to demonstrate the superiority of its sound. But he was quite impressed when Laurel strummed a few bars on her own instrument with Brenneker's lute in tandem. "I don't understand it," he said. "Your cheaply made modern instrument sounds almost as good as mine."

"Better," thought Brenneker, smugly, but then she remembered the damaged bridge and hoped it would stand the strain. She roused herself wearily and went to find a few more holes which she hastily filled with silk.

When Laurel's time came to play, she mounted a stool on the edge of the stage. Brenneker peered out through the sound holes and saw a sea of faces watching. As Laurel tuned up, Brenneker heard an unnerving crek as the wood near the bridge shifted slightly. To her horror she saw daylight between the bridge and the body of the lute. She jumped to the ceiling of her home, bound the gap quickly, and prayed that the mend would hold. Her spinnerets ached with the strain of making so much silk, and she was very tired, but forced herself to pick the strings nimbly as Laurel began with a lively dance tune. Apparently the lovely tone impressed the judges, for Laurel was selected from a large field of competition to enter the finals.

The young man with the antique instrument was also one of the finalists, and he stopped to wish Laurel good luck. Laurel asked him if he would accompany her on "The Ash Grove," but he excused himself, saying that time would be too short for him to learn the intricate counterpart melody. He also assured her that without a duet piece, she didn't have a chance in the competition.

This point was emphasized by the lovely duet played by the young man and a woman who accompanied him on the psaltry. They received a standing ovation from the audience and high marks from the judges.

"Mercy," thought Brenneker. "Now Laurel won't be able to win the scholarship," and spider tears dampened the silk of her web.

"Hey! It's raining on my picnic," said a small voice near her.

She looked over and saw Turkawee calmly munching a chunk of spruce.

Without thinking, Brenneker pounced and bit with just enough venom to cause the woodworm to fall into a swoon.

"That should keep you from doing more damage!" she snapped. But the damage had already been done. One of the sounding pegs looked as if it were ready to crumble into dust. Brenneker could feel, through her feet, the ominous vibrations as the tension of the strings pulled against the ravaged wood.

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Finally Laurel's turn came again. She played a few classical pieces, a rondo, and sang "The Wife of Ushers Well," accompanying herself beautifully with an intricate rhythm she had worked out. For her last song, she began "The Ash Grove." Her first variation was neatly composed, but Brenneker thought it lacked the clever harmony of the previous duet. The second variations sounded very lonely without accompaniment, and this provoked Brenneker to try something she'd never done before. On the third verse she began to play her web in the counterpoint harmony as she had heard Thomas play so many times on the recorder. Laurel paused abruptly, but then, true performer that she was, began to play the melody in clear, bold tones which complemented Brenneker's descant. Laurel played every variation, and Brenneker knew them all and answered back. The people in the audience were amazed that someone could play two-part harmony on one instrument. This was the most lovely duet arrangement of "The Ash Grove" that the judges had ever heard.

"That's the first time I ever heard anyone play a duet alone," said the young man with the lute as she came down from the stage. "Your harmony was better than any duet I've ever heard. How did you ever do that?"

Flustered, Laurel answered, "I don't know. I guess sometimes one must be alone to truly be in harmony with one's self."

A few more contestants got up to play, but they seemed half-hearted. The contest went of course to Laurel, who was almost as bewildered at her music as was everyone else. When she ascended the stage to accept the scholarship, the audience cheered and whistled for an encore.

Laurel sat down and prepared to play again, but just then there came a terrible wrenching sound and a loud snap. Brenneker saw the roof fly off her home, pulling a tangle of cobwebs

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after it. She cowered by the sound pegs, weak and frightened, and saw the face of Laurel staring down at her. Raising one timorous leg, she strummed a chord on her music web and thought she saw recognition in Laurel's eyes.

One of the judges came onstage to help pick up the debris. When he saw the large spider, he said, "How ugly! Let me kill it for you."

"No," said Laurel. "It's the fairy harpist that Sanger told me about. See how she plays her web like a harp. She's been my secret friend all these years."

Because Brenneker appeared to be in a very weakened state and near death, Laurel kept her in a bottle for a few days and fed her all the crickets she could catch. Then, when it appeared that the spider would live, she took her back to the small town and turned her loose in the woods.

It was not the woods of home, but Brenneker found a hollow tree in which to string her harp and was quite content to play her songs alone for a while, although she missed Laurel's music. When spring came that next year, she played her love song to the open air, and it was Wisterness who came, tapping shyly on her web strings to attract her attention.

"I have always loved your songs," she said. "I had hoped you would come."

"Now you shall play my songs," he said, and he sacrificed himself to their mutual need.

Weeks later, she watched her young spiderlings float away on their kiteless strings, and she knew she would not play alone anymore. Then, feeling the deep harmony of the universe in her soul, she returned her web to the Dorian mode and played the gentle, lilting sadness that was now Wisterness.

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